



Handfuls of Shattered Pieces

Pieces of Us Series - Book 1

Kerry Taylor

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By Kerry Taylor

CHAPTER 1

Running. That's the first thing I remember after escaping The Darkness. I don't know how I escaped or what changed for it to even become possible. I don't remember what happened to The Shadow, or how far I had come. All I can remember is the heart thumping, feet burning, running.

I ran through deep woods for what felt like days until finally, my feet battered and bloodied and my entire body covered with cuts and scratches from the branches and brush, I came to a wide black road.

I followed that road, exhausted and weak, but determined nothing would stop me. I couldn't go back, I wouldn't, so onwards I walked, stumbling over my own bare feet constantly, and jumping with terror everytime the wind would rise up and rattle the leaves on the trees around me.

It had been so long since I had heard so much noise, so many sounds. A bird singing not far from me, had me stood still, transfixed for an unspeakable amount of time. I had forgotten how comforting and yet terrifying sounds could be.

Further down the road, so very much further, and the sun was rising higher in the sky. The clouds cleared enough for the rays to shine down on me and I held out my arms, feeling the soothing warmth on my bare skin. I closed my eyes and remembered lazy afternoons on a purple checked blanket in a sea of bright green lawn, the sound of my mother's laugh and the touch of her hand in my hair.

I snapped my eyes open, shaking off the memory. I couldn't go there, couldn't let myself remember. It used to help, used to make me think there was hope. Eventually I learnt that hope was for fools, and memories were nothing more than another form of brutal torture.

I looked to the road, to my bloodied bare feet upon it. That was real. That was my hope now. *Keep walking, don't stop.*

A noise louder than any I had heard so far came from behind me, a loud rumble, so deafening I had to cover my ears as I began to shake in fear of the unknown. Then it stopped and I slowly moved my hands down, only to be assaulted by two loud bangs. I leapt around, looking for the source, terrified, and found a car had stopped just a few feet behind me. Two men were standing at either side of it, looking at me warily. No, not men, Police, I realised. I remembered the uniform, and what it meant.

They studied me, the same way I had once watched wild animals in the Lincoln Park Zoo as a child.

“Ma’am?” The slightly shorter of the two men said, startling me. It had been so very long since I heard words, speech. It sounded too loud and I wanted to cover my ears again.

“Ma’am it’s ok. We’re the police. We are here to help you.” He took a step toward me and I stood frozen, trying to take in what he had said. I knew the words, I knew what he had said, but it was still confusing to my brain to hear actual speech.

“Can you tell us where you’ve come from or what happened to you?” He asked. His partner started to move in my direction, and I glanced over to him with caution.

“Everything is ok. I’m officer Pope and this is my partner Officer Bradford. We are not going to hurt you.” They both held out their hands in a placating gesture, but just them being there, the first people I had seen, except for The Shadow, in 2928 days, it was too much, too much noise and movement and fear.

I forced my feet to move. I had to keep moving, keep walking. I couldn’t go back. I wouldn’t. I took two steps backwards, then turned and set off running as fast as I possibly could, My feet burned with every raw slap against the asphalt and I was gasping for breath, my body thin and weak. Heavy boots pounded the ground right behind me and within seconds strong arms wrapped around me, holding me tight to a firm body.

A deafening noise began, so loud I was sure it would burst my ear drums and leave me deaf. I fought for freedom against the

arms, as the noise went on and on, but there was no release, no more freedom.

The sound got louder as both men now fought to hold me tight between them. I fought and struggled while also trying to work out what the sound was, wanting to know what other danger awaited me.

I fought until I literally ran out of power and my body began to shut down around me. My limbs became heavy and refused to move. My chest was heaving so hard I could not take in air and then the edges of my vision began to darken and I knew that the peace was coming. I knew the peace well. It was my friend, the one who carried me away when the pain became too much. Peace had almost completely carried me away when I realised the sound had stopped. The thought struck me then. That sound had been me. Screaming. It had been so long since I heard that sound, any sound made by me. My last thought before I grabbed my friend, peace's hand and let it carry me off, was the simple wonder that somewhere within me, my voice still existed.

CHAPTER 2

I awoke to silence. Keeping my eyes closed, I took a moment to listen to my surroundings. It was a habit I had learned early on in The Darkness, a way to make myself somewhat aware and prepared for what would be lurking in wait when I opened my eyes.

This time there was no quiet breathing across the room as The Shadow waited, or scuffling of critters on the ground around me. There was just total and utter silence.

A breath in and I wondered at the smell. I expected to be surrounded by the scent of moulding stone, damp, my own waste and the heavy iron of blood, my blood. Instead it smelled clean and fresh. I could smell the disinfectant my mom would use to scrub the kitchen floors of our pretty little cottage, and a pine smell too, but not real pine, not like in the forest. It was an artificial scent, made up of chemicals.

I opened my eyes slowly, needing to know where I was. The bright white ceiling looking back at me was a startling reminder of what happened, of my running and of the Police officers holding me as I fought. I looked around hurriedly, scared they would be there watching me, but no one was watching me. I was alone, laid in a bed, covered in crisp white sheets, in a sparkling white room. A needle had been put in my right arm and it ran up to a bag of clear liquid.

I lifted the sheet, checking I was clothed and found I had on a white and blue patterned gown. It was longer than the t-shirt I had been wearing before and so very clean and soft. No blood had dried on it, making it all crusty and stiff. It was just bright and smooth.

Footsteps approaching close to the door, opposite me, had me dropping the sheet back into place and watching warily for danger. The door opened gently and in walked a tall man in a

long white coat and dress trousers, like my Daddy would wear to work each morning before I was taken.

I looked to the stranger's face and slowly took in his features, searching for the evil I now knew so well. Instead I found bright blue eyes, a square jaw, and dimples as he softly smiled at seeing me studying him. He looked pretty young, I thought. Older than I was, but younger than my Daddy and The Shadow. His dark blonde hair was cute and floppy, sat perfectly styled to the right side.

"Hey there. I'm your doctor, Alexander King. You can just call me Xander though. How are you feeling?" He asked as he walked in and left the door slightly ajar behind him. He took a few steps in, but stopped near the foot of the bed I lay in. I just stared at him wide-eyed, focusing on the smoothness of his rich voice. It sounded wonderful, almost musical.

"You were in rough shape when you came to us. We've cleaned up the numerous lacerations on your body and bandaged your feet. You're on IV antibiotics and fluids, as you were severely dehydrated. We'll be keeping you here for tonight at least." He went on when I didn't reply.

He seemed kind, I concluded. I didn't see any evil in him. It was always there in those filled with it, in the eyes. There was no hiding it. If you had seen it once, you would always see it again and I couldn't find it in this doctor.

I wondered if he knew who I was? I wanted to know if he had told the police to call my Mom and Dad. It had been so long and I knew I had changed and they would have too, but I wanted them. I wanted them to hold me and kiss me like they used to. If they did that, then I could be me again, right? Everything could go back to how it was before, and be normal again, I was sure of it.

"The police haven't been able to find anything with your name. Could you tell me? Your name?" He asked even more gently. I looked to him and questioned hard if he actually wanted me to speak, to tell him. It had been so long. I was

scared to say a word, not that I was sure I could anyway. Would my voice even come out if I told it to?

More than anything I wanted my Mom and Dad though. I knew if I could just see them, everything could be alright. I could pretend The Darkness and The Shadow never existed and just be me again. My life could be good and happy, just like it used to be.

I opened my mouth, ready to speak for the first time in years, but nothing came out but a rough weeze.

“Hold on. Let me get you some water.” Xander said as he dropped the file in his hand to the table in the corner and moved slowly closer to me.

I jumped away from him and pushed myself up to sitting, ready to run if necessary, as he came to a stop at the top of the bed and studied me. He noticed my panic, and slowed his movement even more. Very slowly he reached out to the cabinet beside me and poured water from a plastic jug, into a small blue glass.

“Here.” He held the glass out toward me and nodded when I met his face. “Just start with small sips, ok?”

My hand trembled wildly as I reached toward him for the glass. As soon as I had it, he pulled away his hand and stepped back to where he had been before, at a safer distance for me.

The glass shook so badly in my hand, a little spilled over and I hurried to hold it in both hands to stop me from losing more. I was mad at myself for spilling some. I had to covet every drop of water, I knew that. I couldn't afford to waste any because I never knew when more would come.

I raised the glass to my lips and took a sip. I moaned a little at the luxury of not only clean drinking water, but it was also cold, really cold, with ice. It was so good. I drank the entire cup on the next drink and wished I could have more.

“Better?” Xander asked, startling me again. I looked up to him guiltily, scared there would be repercussions for ignoring his instructions to sip it slowly, but he was just smiling again.

“Good.” The word felt like a test, to see if my voice would come out this time, and it did. It had been a very rough whisper, rather than my voice, but it was enough to set my heart pounding. It was the first word I had spoken since the beating I had received the first day for talking. Not one word of sound had left my lips since that day, until that point.

“That’s good. Do you think you can give me your name now? I’d like to try and find some family who could be here with you?”

“O-Olivia.” I really had to push the sound out, but it was so hard and the word, as it came out, sounded so foreign to me. For so long I had been no one, had no name. I had only been what he allowed me to be, and that was not anything I ever wanted to be again. “Olivia Byrd. I...” I stopped myself from telling him what I had begun to. Last time I said the words it had been the beginning of the end of me.

“It’s ok Olivia, tell me.” He urged as he listened intently.

“I.....I just want m-my Mom and D-Dad.” Tears escaped and ran down my cheeks as I said their names out loud, for the first time in so long. It had been years since I even let myself think about them. It hurt too much, but laid there, free of The Darkness and *him*, maybe I could have them both, and my life, back again.

“It’s going to be ok. We’re going to track them down and get them here for you, ok?” I nodded as I fought to wipe away the rapidly flowing tears. Tears were bad, a sign of how weak I was. Tears always meant more pain because they just seemed to get *him* more excited. It had been a long time since I let *him* see me shed a tear and the fear of letting them out, even without the monster there, was great.

“I need to speak to the police so they can find your family. I’ll be back soon though, ok? Just try and rest for a while. You’re safe now. No one will hurt you here.” He said it so firmly, with such belief, that I almost believed him.

I listened hard as he left the room. The door fell closed behind him, but not all the way and I could hear him talking right outside.

“We were right. She is Olivia. Contact missing persons. Get her family over here. She’s asking for them.” He said calmly. He knew who I was? Did that mean people had been looking for me? For all of this time?

A strange feeling rose within me, a feeling I had not dared to feel for so long. Hope. Hope that I could go home and everything could be just as it was. It was a foolish lie to tell myself, to even think such things, because deep down I knew I could never ever be who I was before. I had been broken, shattered into millions of tiny pieces again and again. To think I could just magically put them all back and be magically fixed, was a delusion, but it was one I needed more than anything in that lonely, terrifying moment. It was the only thing keeping me going.

Hours passed, and mostly I slept. I was bone tired and too weak to fight the sleep that constantly overtook me. Xander came to sit with me often. He’d just chat, about anything and everything and I would just listen. He didn’t ask me questions, except to check if I needed anything. He just kept me company when he could. It felt good to have someone there with me. I had forgotten what it was like to not feel lonely.

Food was brought to me, but it had been so long since I was given anything resembling real food, it was all just too overwhelming. I would try a forkful, maybe two and be completely full.

At some point two police detectives came into the room hoping to question me, but the two middle aged men, one balding, one very overweight, were far too terrifying a reminder of my torturer, and more than I could handle. I had slipped into a full blown panic attack, and Xander had shoved them out as he told them I needed more time, then spent the next half hour trying to calm me down.

Day turned into night and I slept through most of it, waking several times, just long enough to find Xander asleep in the chair beside me each time. He had finished his shift that evening and I knew he was staying because he didn't want to leave me alone until my parents arrived. He had told me so before I drifted off, but I never expected him to actually stay all night. It was such a kind thing to do and it had been so long since I felt such kindness. It comforted me to know that level of good still existed.

XANDER

Finally she gave up the fight and let her eyes close as sleep overcame her. She looked so childlike, a tiny little thing in the middle of the large bed.

I had been the first one to attend when she'd been brought in by two cops who found her on the interstate, out near Shawnee National Forest.

She was barefoot, dressed in only a men's t-shirt which had once been white, but had since been stained with endless months worth of dirt and blood stains . It had been obvious as I started my exam on the girl, she had been through hell, There were scars all over her body, from the soles of her feet, all the way up to several small ones on her face. I couldn't even begin to guess what had caused half of them, but there were definitely a variety of burns, puckered lines made by a blade of some kind and raised lines indicating she had been beaten with a belt or something similar. Her hair was very long and hung in clumps, caked with blood and dirt.

I quickly realised she had been held in some way, against her will and that was what had triggered my memory of the young girl who had been kidnapped when I was a teenager. I left orders for my intern and the nurses to get her cleaned up as much as possible and to hook up an IV, then left the room,

searching for the old story on my cell as I went. As soon as the photo of the sweet little nine year old girl, smiling widely in a floral sundress, popped up, I knew it was her. She was older, obviously. It had been eight years, but her dark green irises were the same. There was no mistaking those very distinctive eyes.

I had informed the cops waiting outside her room and left them to look into it while I got back to check on her.

I don't know what it was that made me feel so attached to her. Maybe the way she had been brought in alone and afraid, just as I had, after an RTA so many years before. Maybe I just saw in her the need for someone to be there. Whatever it was, I was resolved in my need to keep a close watch on her until her family were found. She was scared and had been through hell. I wouldn't leave her alone in what must be a terrifying place.

As soon as she had confirmed who she was the CPD had been notified and her family were being tracked down. It was only a matter of time until they came for her. I hoped that would give her the first step to a long journey of healing.

OLIVIA

The next morning I woke, keeping my eyes closed as always, and heard hushed voices from across the room. One was Xander, but the other was a woman. I couldn't make out what was being said, which unnerved me and forced me to open my eyes and look around hurriedly, trying to gauge the situation around me.

Xander stood over by the window of my hospital room, whispering with an older woman. I could only see her from the side, but she was older, in her fifties, with a neat greying bob and dressed in blue slacks and a crisp white shirt. She was slim and tall, and very immaculately made up. She had a small

black case in her hand and a phone in her other hand as she articulated whatever she was saying with a waving hand.

Xander glanced past her and over to me, then smiled when he saw me watching. I was still wary of him somewhat, but he had been so good to me, staying when he could just to keep me company. He had told me about his partner, Simon, who was a defense attorney and worked in the city. He'd told me about his work, his home, his hobbies and anything else he could chat about, so in a way I felt as though I was coming to know him enough to lower my very high guard, just a little, with him.

“Good morning Olivia.” He greeted cheerfully as he walked past the woman and took his usual seat beside me.

“Are th-they here?” I asked hopefully. I had been waiting so long. Surely as soon as my parents knew I was ok, they would come? I was sure they would come. It wouldn't take them as long as it had been.

“I need to speak to you about that, but first I want you to meet a friend of mine, Jenny.” As he spoke the older lady approached the bed, placing a chair beside Xander. She sat and smiled at me. Her face was deep with lines, likely made by years happy smiles, and her eyes were kind and gentle.

“Hello Olivia. I'm pleased to meet you sweetie.” She said, and her voice instantly brought back images of my mother, her soft voice as I left her that last morning.

“Have a great day Honey. Be careful crossing the street. I love you.” She'd said as she kissed me goodbye at the door of our happy home, just as she did every morning.

“Olivia?” Xander's smooth voice pulled me from the memory and I snapped my eyes open, not even realising I had closed them. “You doing ok?” He asked as he studied me with concern.

“Ok.” I replied with a nod. My voice was still the sandpaper rough croak of a whisper, but was very gradually becoming

stronger. I tended to stick to single words where possible if I had to speak at all.

“I brought Jenny here today because I know she is absolutely the best person to help you. I....Olivia, I have some bad news sweetheart. I hate to have to tell you, but you have to know so we can decide what to do next for the best for you.” The reluctance in his words had me terrified. Whatever he was about to tell me, he really didn’t want to.

I knew, deep down. I knew what he was going to say. I had begun to think it already, when there had been no word from my parents the night before. I knew if they were able, they’d have been there in a heartbeat, or at least made sure I knew they were on their way. They loved me, I had always known that. They loved me and they would never leave me scared and alone, unless...

“Your parents, I’m so sorry, but they are both gone. Your mom died after a long battle with cancer two years ago and your dad, he died just a year later in a car accident. The police officer informed me this morning. That’s when I called Jenny.”

Silent tears escaped and slid down my cheeks as that stupid little bit of hope I had begun to feel, dropped to the pit of my stomach like a stone, making me need to throw up. I knew I should never have hoped. Hope was dangerous, and now I had been hurt again by it, this time in the worst possible way.

“They never stopped searching for you sweetie. They were always on the news, appealing for witnesses and new information. They coordinated searches constantly, all over the city. They never gave up hope that they would get you back. They loved you.” Jenny added.

They never gave up on me. That just made me feel even worse because I gave up on them. Some time around day 1000 I decided that I needed to stop remembering them, hoping to see them again. I blocked them out, pushed away memories and gave up all hope. Was that why they died, because I stopped believing in them? Was this my fault for letting hope go?

“Jenny’s with family services. The Police have informed me you don’t have any relatives left living.

“Once upon a time I was the same Olivia. I woke from a car accident in this very hospital. My parents were both killed and I had no one.” I looked up into those bright blue eyes in surprise and he smiled sympathetically.

“Jenny helped me then. She put me with my foster family, and I grew to love them so much. I found my place with them once again, and when I was sixteen they adopted me. You can have that too Olivia. You lost your parents and you’ve been through so much, but you can find a new start and be happy. We’re going to help you make that happen.”

“How?” I asked. Being happy seemed like a very distant impossibility as I sat there with my thousands of broken pieces rattling loose inside.

“My adoptive parents, they stopped taking in foster children five years ago, when they were finally able to have a child of their own. They already had four adopted sons, and I had just moved out. They were settled and decided to focus more on their careers and the family that they had, but they are still registered foster carers. They occasionally take a child in if Jenny asks for their help. I spoke to them earlier today about you and they want you to go and stay with them. Jenny can make it happen, if it’s what you want?”

This was all too much. I had been expecting this beautiful reunion with my parents. I had envisioned tears and hugs, lots of tight, suffocating hugs. Instead I found out they were gone and I was, as I had been for the last 2928 days, completely alone in the harsh world.

“Olivia, sweetheart, I know this is completely terrifying. All you wanted was your parents and to find out they’re gone.....I know it must be devastating. I’m so sorry. But my parents, Grant and Kiera, they are good people. They will be there for you through whatever comes next. They can help you find your feet and start to live again, and I’ll be there too, to help

you. I know it feels like you're alone, but I promise you, you don't have to be."

I sat thinking as I tried to reign in the stupid, weak tears that were getting free. I was seventeen if my day counting and maths while in The Darkness was right. I only needed to go into care until I turned eighteen, that much I knew. What did it matter where I went? No one could ever fill the huge hole left by the loss of my parents. No one would ever be able to fix me, or make me whole. I was broken and now, alone and without the two people I loved most, I knew I would stay that way. There was no way to repair the level of broken I had been left with, so what did anything really matter anymore?

At least if I agreed to what Xander offered, I would have him close. I could hold onto the one person I had come to know as a good man, since leaving The Darkness. That seemed like my best and only option in that terrifying moment, so I turned to him with a deep breath and nodded.

"Ok." I whispered as I swiped away more tears, angrily. "Ok."

"That's a good decision sweetie. I'll get the paperwork moving and we can hopefully get you to your new home, and all settled tomorrow." I looked to Xander with fear and he smiled and nodded.

"I'll be right there with you until you feel comfortable." He reassured me, and it was a comfort. I felt safer when he was near. I didn't know why or what it was about him, but I knew I was safe with him, that he wouldn't hurt me or allow me to be hurt.

At least wherever I was going, I knew I would be safe, because one thing I knew for sure, Xander wouldn't send me there if it was in any way dangerous. He had my back and knowing that, knowing there was just one person on earth who I could count on, helped ease the pain tearing me apart in that moment, a little at least.

CHAPTER 3

I was a wreck. The whole journey from the hospital, and the long drive into the outskirts of the city had scared me to hell. It had been so long since I was in a car, surrounded by fast moving traffic, people and buildings. Xander had been in the back of Jenny's car with me and he had taken my hand early on when I couldn't keep it from trembling violently, but it had still been pretty harrowing, all of the sights and the deafening sounds.

Just leaving the hospital had made me a breathless, sweating, anxious mess. The car ride had been hell, Another car's horn beeping had sent me completely spiralling and the next thing I knew I opened my eyes, at Xander's desperate request, to find myself curled up and rocking in the corner of the seat. Xander had talked me down, assuring me I was safe and I just crumbled. He pulled me tentatively into a side hug, giving me the chance to pull away. I didn't though, I needed the comfort.

He held me there the remainder of the journey and I felt a lot safer, though still terrified.

Now we were approaching the biggest house I had ever seen in my life. To get to it we had driven through huge electronic gates, which Xander had given Jenny a code to punch into a little keypad, to open. We drove up a block paved drive and parked alongside three large, shiny cars, in front of a row of three garages.

The house was two storeys and really wide, six huge windows wide on the top floor. It was bright white with a grey roof and out front were beautifully coloured flowers just everywhere, planted in perfectly straight borders around the driveway, in pots out front of the house and in huge, fancy baskets hanging from hooks beside the door. It was obviously a well loved, very well cared for home, and in a way it made me think of our little cottage, where I grew up before I was taken. While it had been much smaller, it too had been white and adorned with my mom's prized planters all across the front, filled with every bloom my mom could grow.

"It looks like my two youngest brothers are home too, Don't worry Olivia. They're all really nice." Xander said. He still had one arm wrapped around my shoulders and I had given in and allowed myself to shrink into him a little more, intimidated by the huge house before me and the prospect of facing strangers.

"Don't leave me." I whispered. It was the most I had said since the first day with him, but I needed him. I was terrified he would go and I would be alone.

"I'm staying with you as long as you need me." He promised, then he led me out of the car, up the four steps leading to the house and straight through the huge dark wood front door.

The entryway was lined with coat hooks and shelves filled with shoes that ranged from huge sneakers and boots that barely fit in the cubbies, to tiny little pink wellington boots and sparkly buckle ups, obviously belonging to a child.

“We need to leave our shoes here. My mom’s a stickler for it.” Xander said as he toed off the sneakers he was wearing.

It had been odd for me when he walked into my room that morning dressed casually in jeans, a black t-shirt and sneakers. He looked so different in them, to how he had looked in the dressier clothes he’d been in every time before, so much more laid back and even more approachable.

He had brought me clothes too, bought for me by his parents. I had been overwhelmed by their kindness as I had dressed in them that morning. I had new underwear, then some wonderfully soft, slightly stretchy jeans, a pretty pink camisole and a red sweater that felt softer than anything I had ever felt in my life. It had all been brand new with tags still attached, even the fur lined tan boots that I had pulled on last. I had no idea how they knew what size I was. I didn’t even know that information myself, but it had all fit perfectly. It felt so strange to wear real, clean clothes after so long in nothing but a disgusting, oversized t-shirt. The shoes were the oddest thing. My feet felt so confined and tight in them after being barefoot for so long. Luckily the boots were wide and soft, not putting pressure on my battered feet too much.

Following Xander’s lead, I bent to pull off the shoes and followed as he placed them on a shelf, doing the same.

Behind us, a blaring chirping rang out, startling me to slam my hands over my ears in panic until it stopped. As I lowered my hands slowly, Jenny spoke,

“Sorry sweetie. I need to take this. Go ahead. I’ll be in soon.” I looked to Xander, who just nodded, then let him lead my reluctant shaking body in further. I was sweating and breaths seemed to be in short supply as I fought to hold it together.

We walked through a beautiful entrance hall with a shiny tiled floor and walls painted a pale grey, adorned with hundreds of framed photos of a ton of kids, all looking wonderfully happy as they played on beaches, ate ice creams, flew kites and all manner of other different things.

There was a wide wooden staircase that led off up on the right side, but Xander took me left and past a lounge that looked just as grand as everything else I had seen so far. I glanced in as we passed the open door and caught sight of curly blonde pigtails poking out from the top of a huge black leather sectional. A little girl. It had been so long since I saw a child. Last time I did, I had been one too.

We carried on down the wide hallway and came to a large arch, through which I could see a kitchen as big as the whole ground floor of my home as a child. It too was grey walls, with smooth black cabinets and silvery, sparkly countertops. There was little on display, just a coffee machine and a tea kettle. Everything else was meticulously tidy and clean. There was a huge centre island with six stools around one side and just beyond that I saw huge glass doors that looked out over a garden the size of a football field. It too was beautifully landscaped, with flowers everywhere.

This home really was a piece of heaven. Far too nice for someone as fucked up as me.

“Here he is!” A soft female voice declared, frightening me and making me cling harder to Xander’s navy coat, He turned, and so I went with him until we came face to face with a very gentle looking woman who was way too young to be called ‘Mom’ by Xander, who was at least twenty six himself. She was petite and curvy, just a little taller than me. She had long brown hair pulled up into a fancy ponytail that hung in curls beautifully. She was dressed in dark jeans and a white blouse, with a red sweater over the top and she wore red chucks on her feet, reminding me of my mom, who loved those damned shoes and had them in every colour of the rainbow.

She smiled brightly at Xander, then looked to me with the same warm, open smile.

“Olivia, I’m so happy to have you here,” She said kindly.

“Olivia, this is my Mom, Keira.” Xander introduced, as I stood awkwardly, too scared to release my hold on him for a second.

“Hi.” I whispered, not wanting to seem rude.

“Come and take a seat. Where’s Jenny? She not come in with you guys?” Kiera asked as she turned and walked over to a huge dining table. I counted the chairs and there were twelve! It was made of a very dark wood and the chairs were high backed and black leather. It was set with plates of sandwiches and cakes and there were jugs of water, juice and coffee. The whole place was so grand, I realised I would never dare touch anything for fear of breaking it.

“She’s on a call. She’ll be in soon. Where’s Dad?”

“He and the boys just ran to the store. We were out of tea and I wasn’t sure if Olivia would want some.”

“Probably better Livy gets a few minutes to acclimate without the terrible twosome anyway.” Xander sighed as he pulled out a chair and led me into it. I sat, but kept a handful of his t-shirt tight in my hand, stretching the fabric a little between us. I knew I must look a fool, but I knew that, if I let go, I was going to lose it. Holding onto him, was holding me together.

Xander smiled as he shucked off his coat, then took the seat right beside me, helping me to relax a little, and allowing me to ask my next concerning question.

“Terrible?” I whispered to him. That was the word he had used to describe his brothers. Were they cruel? Would they hurt me?

“It was a joke sweetheart. All of my brothers are good men and they will look out for you. They would never ever hurt you. You have my word. The youngest two though, Cole and Matt, they like to joke around and cause a bit of a stir where possible. You’ll see.” I nodded and tried to look casual, but really I was freaking out. In almost three thousand days, over eight years, it had been just me and The Shadow. How would I ever get used to being surrounded by so many people again?

“Can I get you a drink Olivia?” Keira asked from where she sat across the table from me. I looked over the table and panicked. There were so many options. Which should I choose? Was there a right selection? I was so used to actions

having the harshest consequences, making a decision like that seemed too risky. If I chose wrong, would there be punishment?

“How about some orange juice?” Xander asked and I let out the panicked breath I’d been holding and nodded. Xander wouldn’t choose anything to get me into trouble.

Keira poured me a tall glass full and handed it over. Xander reached out and took it before I even moved and placed it right in front of me.

“Think you could eat something?” He asked as he picked up a plate and started adding a few sandwiches to it.

“I’m ok.” I whispered back, feeling too anxious to try and eat anything. Xander glanced briefly across to his Mom, and they shared a look, but before I could decipher it, Xander was back to grabbing a heaping pile of food. He put it down in front of him, then dove in like he’d never eaten, making his Mom smile lovingly to him.

“I was so sorry to hear about your parents Honey.” Keira offered as she turned her attention back to me. “I want you to know you have a home with us as long as you need it. We want you to feel settled here, so anything you need, you just let us know. We will do whatever we can to make all of these changes smoother for you.”

“Thankyou.” I said as loudly as my scratchy voice would allow. I felt tearful and emotional, overwhelmed that so far this new home seemed as amazing as Xander had promised, but also desperately sad that I had to settle here, instead of back in my happy little childhood home, with my parents at my side.

The front door slamming hard, had me leaping to my feet terrified. I looked to Xander for reassurance, but was stopped by raised voices.

“Come on Jen-ster. You know you missed me the most!” A deep male voice boomed through the house.

“Get lost loser! Jen definitely missed me more than your loser ass, right Jen?” A second, slightly accented voice yelled and it completely terrified me. It was too much, too much noise, too much testosterone, just too much. I sank into the chair and curled up, my head tucked against Xander’s thigh below the table, my hands clamped over my ears to block out the shouts I could still hear, though muffled now.

Xander’s hand fell on my back and started to rub gently, then I heard his rumbling voice, firm, but not loud.

“Guys, shut the fuck up! You’re scaring Olivia. She’s not good with loud noises.”

“How many times do I have to tell you two about yelling anyway?” Keira added sharply. There was silence then, and I suddenly realised how crazy I must look to these people. Curled up under their table. I moved my hands from my ears a little, testing the noise level.

“It’s ok sweetheart. They’ve shut up now. I told you they were trouble.” Xander said softly. I opened my eyes and turned my head, surprised when I found him on his knees, in the space where his chair was before, looking over me. I hadn’t even felt him move.

“I...I’m sorry.” I whispered, embarrassed.

“Not your fault. Come on now.” He took my hand and eased me up, then placed my hand back on his shirt, where I had been gripping it before. I grabbed a handful and held on as I got settled back in the seat. I was shocked when I looked up and two sets of eyes studied me from beside where Keira sat, looking at me with regret, and maybe a little guilt?

“I’m really sorry if we scared you. We didn’t mean to.” The bigger of the two said. He was tall, taller than Xander, maybe close to six and a half feet and he was really really big and strong looking. He was dressed in khaki cargo pants and a form fitting black Henley, through which it was very obvious he was ripped with muscles on every inch of him. He smiled a little, trying to reassure me I thought, since I was probably

staring like a rabbit in headlights. He was handsome, there was no denying that, with strikingly dark eyes, The colour so dark grey it was almost black. He had a very angular face, but it was softened by those beautiful eyes. When I just continued to stare he started to fidget, running a hand through his messily styled chestnut brown hair. It was shaved short on the sides, but was longer and kinda messy on top, and it stuck up wildly as he ran his hand through it nervously.

“Olivia, these are my idiot brothers, Cole and Matteo.” Xander said to break the silence and snapping me from my staring enough to blink. Cole. That was a good name for someone with eyes so dark, I thought to myself.

“Just call me Matt, Everyone does,” The other one said and I turned my attention to him. He was a few inches shorter than Cole and not quite as built, but still huge. He wore dark jeans with a baby blue button down, the sleeves neatly rolled up to his elbows. It was clear from his shape and the veins in his arms, he was muscled too, but not as dramatically as Cole. He was slimmer, and more compact. His skin was darker, and I guessed he was maybe mixed heritage, maybe part hispanic from his name? His hair was dark brown, almost black and swept backwards giving him a kind of messy style. His eyes were a deep chocolate brown and when they looked at me, I felt as though they saw right through me, like he could dig right into me and pull out handfuls of all of my shattered pieces.

“Hi.” I whispered, not knowing what else to say.

“Sit boys and get something to eat. Where is your father?” Keira said, breaking up the awkwardness of the last few minutes.

The two guys took the seats they stood behind, beside their Mom and opposite me.

“He’s coming. He got snatched by Evie as we walked in. She wanted to show him a new show she’s watching.” I realised Evie must be the little girl I had seen in the lounge, the

biological child Grant and Keira had five years ago. She had looked about the right age.

A moment later Jenny walked in, her heels clicking on the tile floor. She placed her case on the counter in the kitchen and took a seat at the table, at the other side of Xander, as if she lived there too.

“Hey Jenny. How are you?” Keira asked casually as she sipped from a glass of ice water.

“I’ll be a lot better when I head off to Hawaii for two weeks next month.” Jenny laughed as she pulled a mug toward her and poured some coffee.

“Oh don’t Jenny! I’m so jealous. Grant’s been promising me a trip to Hawaii for twenty years,” Keira laughed and I realised, they were clearly good friends. There was just this comfortable ease between them as they laughed and chatted. They continued to chatter, but all of the talking and laughing was exhausting to keep up with and giving me a headache. Instead I attempted to tune them out as background noise and stared down at the glass of juice in front of me. Cole, Matt and Xander were all watching me, I could feel their eyes on me, but I didn’t want to return their looks and incite any questions, so my focus remained on the glass.

I was still trembling badly and feeling wound up like a coil, ready to burst open at any moment. I still held Xander’s shirt in my right hand, needing the comfort of constantly knowing he was near.

“Jees, that child never stops asking questions.” A deep voice rumbled as footsteps stalked in behind me. I turned quickly, needing to see who it was, and found a man who looked to be in his mid to late thirties, but was likely older. He had sandy blonde hair that was neatly gelled to one side and his face was soft, his jaw covered with a smattering of stubble. He looked across to the table with a wide smile, his perfect Hollywood teeth shining. He was a good looking man, that was for sure. I had a vague thought there must be something in the water in this home, and then hoped like hell it would work it’s magic

on me. I had spent eight years in the dark, being starved, beaten and worse. I was pretty sure I did not look like the pretty little girl my Mom constantly told me I was, before I was kidnapped. I felt like I was very ugly after everything I had been through, scarred and maimed. I hadn't dared a look in the mirror at the hospital, too scared to see who looked back.

"That's your fault Mr Attorney. She gets that inquisitiveness from you." Keira replied and I looked between them as they shared a moment, their eyes lovingly locked together as they both smiled. It was beautiful and a strange reminder to me of all of the happiness that there could be in life if you weren't locked away with a depraved monster.

"Yes, because psychologists never ask questions." Grant retorted with a roll of his eyes. He was big, as tall as Cole, if not even taller and he was heavily muscled too, his biceps bulging from the sleeves of the expensive looking green Polo he wore. If it weren't for the softness of his smile, or the love I had seen in his eyes when he looked at his wife, he would have been terrifying, his size unable to be anything other than intimidating, but for some reason I wasn't scared. Wary, yes, but not scared. I looked between Grant, Cole, Xander and Matt again and had to fight a small smile. They were all huge, like action heroes. Grant's sons, at least the ones I had met, obviously picked up his workout habits.

"Come over here and meet Olivia now." Keira ordered, and Grant nodded and did as he was told, stalking over to the table. I was glad when he took a wide berth from me and walked around to the other side of the table, where most everyone else had sat.

"Hi Olivia." He greeted once he was in my eye line. His smile was fixed in place and I felt oddly comforted by how very similar he was to my Dad. Bigger, much, much bigger, but the blonde hair and kind smile so reminded me of my Dad. Maybe that was why I hadn't been scared by him, "I'm Grant, in case you didn't know. I'm really happy to have you here with us." He sat beside Cole and placed his folded arms on the table in

front of him as he spoke, seemingly giving me his full attention.

“Hi.” I whispered again. I really needed to think of something else to say!

“Grant’s right Honey. We’re all happy to have you here with us. We want you to make this your home and we really hope you can come to be happy here. I have a room all set up for you upstairs. You have your own bathroom so you won’t have to share with any of the boys and I’ve got you a few essentials to get you started, a few clothes and such. Anything else you need we will get as soon as you feel up to it, but in the meantime, if there is anything you need, or anything we can do to make you feel more settled, you just let one of us know. Our other two sons, Kyle and Kade live here too, but they work a lot, so we may not see them as often. They’re all good boys though. And then there’s Evie. She likes to talk a mile a minute and asks a lot of questions, but who wasn’t like that at five years old?” Keira laughed light heartedly and Jenny agreed.

“If she drives you crazy, just put on cartoons and she’ll stop. It’s a trick we’ve all learnt recently.” Cole mock whispered to me over the table, and I looked up to him with a smile and a nod, though the smile felt weird and fake. It had just been so long since I felt a smile on my face.

“How are you doing?” Xander asked quietly as he leant in close.

“Ok.” I whispered.

“Try to eat something for me, huh? It will stop some of that trembling.” He coaxed, and I saw from the corner of my eye, the other guys listening in as the adults chatted away over us. I looked at the food and my stomach turned.

I’d spent hour after hour in The Darkness, starving and desperate for food and water, just fantasizing about greasy burgers and pizza and sodas and candy. I had longed to one

day taste real food again, instead of the disgusting, unidentifiable slop I was too rarely given by The Shadow.

But now I was free and Xander had offered me anything I wanted to eat over the last couple of days. He had brought me all manner of things and what I found was, I couldn't stomach any of it any more. The thought made my stomach turn and if I actually ate any of it, I instantly felt nauseous.

"I can't." I whispered defeatedly to Xander and I saw the disappointment and worry on his face. "I'm sorry." I added, hating to let him down after all he had done for me.

"You've barely eaten in days Livy. You need to have something, please?" Xander pushed. Tears pooled in my eyes and I looked down to my glass again, angry with myself for how pathetic and useless I was being.

"Xander, cool it man." Cole said before I could say anything. A chair scraping caught my attention and I looked up just as Matt left the table and stormed into the kitchen. Had I made him mad?

I looked to Xander questioningly, but he just smiled reassuringly, offering me no answers.

"Xander, is Simon coming for dinner tonight?" Grant asked, thankfully giving me a moment without Xander's watchful gaze as he turned to his father.

They all started talking then. Apparently a family dinner was planned for that night, so everyone could get together to meet me, and me them. Simon was coming, along with Xander's other brothers Kyle and Kade. The thought of that huge table, with yet more people around it terrified me and I longed to just find a dark hole somewhere and hide away.

"Here." A deep voice came from behind me as a steaming bowl was placed down before me. I knew before I turned it was Matt, by the slight accent in his voice. He was right beside me when I looked up, but I didn't jump. I strained to look up at his face and saw he was watching me with those all knowing eyes once again. "Try this. It's not so rich. It won't

make you nauseous.” He explained and I wondered for a moment if I had spoken aloud earlier, but I knew I hadn’t.

“How?” I asked, needing to know how he understood the way I felt.

“Experience *Carina*, experience.” He simply replied, then he returned to his seat opposite and carried on eating with his head down.

I just sat frozen for a moment, staring at the top of his head. Experience? Did that mean he had been through something similar to what I had? It had to, right? That would explain the way he seemed to see right into me every time his eyes met mine.

Not wanting him to look up and see me staring, I instead moved my gaze to the bowl and found a thin broth. I had to admit, it smelled good, the best thing I had smelled in a very long time.

I moved to pick up the spoon and didn’t miss the way everyone worked hard not to let me see they were all anxiously watching.

It made me nervous, especially when I wasn’t sure I would actually be able to eat what Matt had brought me, but I had to try when he had gone to the trouble. Finally Keira started a conversation about football, which Cole seemed to play, and everyone was joining in, allowing me a reprieve to actually try eating without scrutiny.

The first spoonful was a taste explosion in my mouth. It was definitely some kind of chicken broth and instantly took me back to the chicken soup my mom would make for me as a kid, whenever I was sick. It never failed to make me feel better back then and much like that soup, this broth began to go down without turning my stomach or landing heavy like a rock.

I ate about half before I was full and I didn’t miss the relieved look on Xander’s face out of the corner of my eye. I placed the spoon down gently in the bowl and dared my first look to Matt

since he sat. He was looking across at me, his watchful eyes always taking in every detail.

“Thankyou.” I whispered. “It was good.”

“Matt’s a great cook. He always has soups or casseroles on the stove and goodies on the counter cooling. Wait until you try his empanadas! They’re the fucking bomb!” Cole enthused.

“Language!” Keira instantly scolded. I don’t know how she heard, since she was mid conversation with Jenny, and Cole was talking pretty quietly, but she did.

“Sorry.” Cole smiled at me cheekily with his apology and I saw that trouble Xander had told me about peeking out.

“Xander, why don’t you take Olivia up to her room? Let her get settled?” Keira suggested and I was grateful for the reprieve. I felt exhausted and the stress of the situation was not helping.

“Good idea. I think a rest would be wise, It’s been a long morning.” Xander agreed.

“I just need a quick word alone before I go Olivia, if I can?” Jenny asked as she stood with Xander and I. She walked over to the back corner of the kitchen and motioned a hand for me to follow her. I looked to Xander for reassurance, and permission, and he nodded once. I don’t know why, but I had an urge to turn to the guys and get their approval too. It was like I couldn’t stop myself from turning to them, and when I did, there was no surprise or humour on their faces. Cole just smiled, while Matt nodded just as Xander had. The three of them were telling me they were there, they had my back. I was safe. I heard all of their silent words in those looks between us and it comforted me in a way I would never have thought possible. What was that?

CHAPTER 4

“I just have to check that you feel comfortable with the family and are happy to give this a go before I leave?” Jenny asked once we were alone in the back of the shiny kitchen. I stood, not daring to touch a thing, fidgeting nervously as I fought to keep a clear gap between Jenny and I.

I glanced behind me to the table. Keira and Grant were chatting away together happily, their hands entwined on top of the table. The guys were clearing plates, cups and glasses, but I knew they were all watching me. I saw the glances my way and the constant eye Matt kept on me from where he stood directly opposite.

This family was not mine. They were not my parents and I would never have the life I had before I had been taken, but I was pretty sure they were all good people and they seemed loving and kind. I could make a home there, somewhere to nurse my shattered pieces until I learnt how they would all come back together. It was absolutely the best option I could have and I knew I had to be grateful for it. I couldn;t deny the strong feeling of safety I had with Matt and Cole. It was the same feeling I got with Xander when I met him, but even stronger. I had no idea what the feeling was, but I definitely knew it was there. More than anything, after getting away from The Shadow, safety was what I wanted, so there was no

way I could walk away from the three men who seemed to give it to me.

“Y-yes.” I replied with a firm nod.

“That’s good, sweetie. I’m really happy for you. You really are very lucky to get a home here. Keira and Grant are good people.” Jenny beamed, then moved to put a hand on my shoulder, likely to pat me in reassurance, but there was no way I wanted to be touched. I leapt back out of her reach with a squeak, hitting the counter with my butt hard and instantly gaining the attention of everyone in the room.

“Sorry.” I said hurriedly, then I turned to the room to say it again, but froze when I found Cole and Matt right beside me, looking me over with concern. They must have run to me to get there so fast, and oddly I didn’t find their close proximity intimidating. Instead it gave me a sense of security.

“Sorry.” I said to them too, knowing I had acted erratically.

“No Olivia. That was my fault. I’m sorry.” Jenny offered.

“Come on sweetheart. Let’s get you upstairs to rest for a while.” Xander said as he rounded his wall of brothers and wrapped his arm around my shoulders. He ushered me toward the door, but I stopped and turned back to Keira and Grant, needing to say something. They had already done so much for me.

“Thank you.....for h-having me here.” I said as loud as I could push out.

“It’s our pleasure Honey.” Keira’s words felt genuine, just like everything else she had said to me that morning. There didn’t seem to be a false or malicious part of her.

“Welcome home Olivia.” Grant added kindly. I nodded, not sure it would ever really be home, but hoping maybe one day, it could be.

The bedroom I had been given really was beautiful, painted in greys and pale yellows, with huge floral canvases on the walls.

There was a large king bed, nightstands, a dresser and a desk that all matched, some kind of heavy wood painted white. I had a bathroom off to the right, with both a large tub, and a double shower, and to the left there was a huge walk-in closet, already filled with far more clothes than I would ever need.

A TV hung on the wall opposite the bed and on the nightstand was a brand new Kindle, still in the box, and another box containing an Iphone. I had no idea how to use either, but Xander assured me one of the guys would show me sometime, if I asked.

Xander had shown me around and assured me about ten times that everything in there was for me and I was to use whatever I wanted, then he had left me to take a shower and get some rest. He told me he would be close by so all I had to do was call and he'd be there, but I felt nervous the second he closed the bedroom door behind him. It was the most alone I had been since those cops found me and the silence instantly tried to pull me back to The Darkness.

I shook away the images before they overcame me, and charged into the closet. I knew we were having dinner that night, but I was exhausted and I definitely intended to try and sleep once I felt clean, so I grabbed a brand new pair of beautiful, bright pink cotton PJ pants and an oversized white t-shirt, then went to the bathroom, closing the door behind me. It was dark inside, the only light a small one over the mirror above the vanity and I found it a comfort. It was familiar to me. I knew it was weird. I should want nothing from The Darkness. I should want to forget everything about it, and I did, mainly, but the darkness -that had become my normal in the last eight years and I had missed it since I found myself running through the woods. Everything just seemed too bright. I needed a break from it all.

I undressed quickly and pulled the bandages from my feet. They were still a mess, but bearable. I stepped into the shower. I had to press every button until finally the water came pouring out at force. It was cold at first, but I quickly worked out how to adjust it and finally got it flowing all hot and steamy.

For a long time I just stood under it, the water blasting down over my lowered head and cascading down my body. It felt so good. It was the first shower I had taken since I was nine years old and I had dreamt of it so many times.

The Shadow would very occasionally bring me water to wash, but like the drinking water, it was never clean. I guessed he got it from a stream or a well, definitely not a faucet. It would be freezing cold and there was really little I could do with it to fight the grime and blood I was usually an inch thick with.

I could feel that filth all over me as I stood under that shower, the perfectly clear water hitting me and coming away stained brown as it ran off again. I could feel the blood dried deep into every crevice, the filth that would never leave me completely.

I ran my hands down my sides, running over hundreds of puckered scars and angry red marks from the last few attacks. I saw the heavy bruising on my left side and once again tried hard to remember how it had gotten there. I needed to remember what happened. The Police wouldn't hold off for long. I had been covered with blood when I was found and likely not just my own. Had I done it? Killed *him*? I had imagined it so many times, in so many different ways, but I never thought I would stand a chance, or actually be capable of doing it. The Shadow was a monster of a man, tall and very heavy set. He tossed me around like a rag doll on a regular basis and no matter what struggle I put up, I always lost. I was small, really small. Time in the dark with little food or water was not what a girl needed to thrive and so I didn't think I had really grown much since I was taken. I was quite a bit smaller than my mom was, and she had only been five feet two. I was so thin too, all of my bones poked through my paper thin skin. There was no way I could have killed him, but if I hadn't, then did that mean he would come for me again? Or would he take some other poor innocent child?

Tears escaped at that terrifying thought and for once I didn't stop them. I was alone, no one could see me. Why couldn't I just have five minutes to fall apart? I damn well earned it!

Tears turned into huge, heaving sobs and eventually, exhausted from the exertion, my legs gave out beneath me. I curled into my comfort position, foetal, and just cried like I had needed to since I was a nine year old little girl, as the shower rained down over me.

I cried for that kid I used to be, and for the broken woman that remained of her. I cried for my Mom and Dad who had died still searching for me, when I had given up on them. I cried until I was literally too exhausted to do it anymore.

My throat raw, and my eyes stinging, I took a deep breath and forced myself to stand. I'd had my five minutes. I'd fallen apart. I needed to get it together again. Needing to focus my frayed mind, I grabbed some floral shampoo from the shelf and rinsed my wild, tangled hair through twice. When I was sure I was clean I turned off the water and stepped out into the heavily steamed bathroom. I couldn't see a foot in front of me through the fog and it was a relief, because I hadn't looked in a mirror yet and I wasn't ready if I was honest. The last time I saw my face, I was nine. It was going to be a big shock when I finally got up the courage to look.

"Livy. are you alright in there?" Xander called through the door and I knew I had been too long.

"Yes." I replied, hoping he heard me.

"Matt sent you some herbal tea. He said it will help you sleep. I left it on the nightstand for you."

"Thank you."

I listened to Xander leave the room then took a deep breath. They were all just too kind. I didn't know what I would ever do to thank them all and make it up to them. I literally had nothing to offer in return.

Sighing, I quickly dried off, then pulled on the PJs I had brought in. I towel dried my hair and cringed when I saw the masses of wild tangles hanging down over my shoulders. I took a brush from the vanity drawer and set to work trying to calm the wild mess, but a few minutes in I knew it was

pointless. It had been too long since a brush or shampoo had touched those overgrown ends. Dropping the brush on the counter, I rifled through the drawer filled with every beauty product you could think of, until I found a small pair of scissors. They were far from ideal. But I just needed the mess gone. I needed to try and feel human again.

I gathered my hair in two bunches on my shoulders and just started hacking right below the top of my shoulder. It took me a while since my hair was thick and the scissors were tiny, but eventually I hacked it all off and tossed the masses of tangled dark brown locks into the trash. I brushed through what remained, getting out all of the remaining tangles, then tied it up on top of my head in a knot. It felt so good to have it off of my neck and shoulders, so freeing.

By the time I settled under the heavenly soft yellow comforter, with Matt's tea in hand, I felt almost human again. My skin was clean and for the first time I could remember, I wasn't repulsed by my own odour. I smelt good, floral. My hands were clean, my arms free of dried blood streaks.

I sat in the bed, sipping the tea. It was good, kind of minty and lemony at the same time and I loved the warm feeling as it went down. I needed to get up the courage to ask Matt what it was, so I could have more.

By the time I finished the cup, it was working its magic, or I was just that exhausted, but either way I drifted into a deep sleep which I desperately needed, feeling as comfortable as I ever remembered being in that huge luxurious bed.

CHAPTER 5

XANDER

I quietly opened the door to Olivia's room and peeked in. She had been in the shower for over an hour and I had heard her sobbing, but left her to it, knowing she needed to let some of her pain out. She was being so strong, holding it all in. It needed to come out sometime.

Now she lay in bed, taking up not even one quarter of the space with her tiny frame, fast asleep and snoring very quietly. I was relieved to see her resting. She was pretty weak, malnourished, and lacking any real muscle in her body. It would take time for her to build up to days without naps.

She had done well that morning. I knew she was terrified, clinging to me as though I may disappear at any second, but she had remained strong and pretty calm and even forced herself to speak a little. I had been proud of her and even more hopeful that she could find a happy home here with my adopted family, just as I had.

“How is she?” I turned and found my Mom behind me in the hall. I pulled Olivia’s door closed quietly, and ushered my Mom further away so we wouldn’t wake her.

“Better. She took a long shower and now she’s sleeping.”

“That’s good. She looked exhausted.”

“She’s been kept in confined quarters. Her body lacks muscle and she’s severely underweight. It all makes her pretty weak and fragile right now. It’s going to take time to build her up.” I explained.

“However long, whatever it takes, we’ll get her there son. You did the right thing bringing her to us. We’ll all be here for her now.”

“I know Mom. Thank you.” And I did know, because I had watched my family help so very many kids from all different backgrounds. No matter who they were or where they were from, however bad the situation they came from, my parents had cared for and loved them from the minute they entered that home and for long after they left. My brothers, particularly Kade and Matt, came from situations similar to some of what Olivia had been through. They had been broken and scared when they arrived, but with time and love they had found a home here and my parents had made sure they kept that home forever. They were good people and I knew, along with my brothers, they could find ways to ease the hurt and fear I saw in Olivia too.

“Go downstairs and see your brothers. They’re all here now, and Simon just text to say he’s on his way. I’ll stay close in case she needs anything.” Mom said with a pat on my shoulder.

“I said I would stay with her.” I protested, but Mom just smiled.

“Xander, you don’t live here anymore. You have a fiance and a life of your own. You need to step back a little, and let Olivia get comfortable with all of us, because you can’t always be at her side. She will be fine if you go downstairs.” My Mom wisely said and I knew she was right. Olivia had attached to me because I had been the first safe person she met and had gotten to know, but I needed to give her enough space to get closer to the others. I would still be there for her, as I promised, but to move forward, she needed me to step back a little.

“You’re right, but just stay close. She suffers with really bad anxiety. You need to call me if she gets short of breath.”

“I know. I will. It’s ok Honey. I’ve got this.” She assured me and I knew she did. It was just so hard to step back though when I knew the badly scared girl in the next room had asked me to be close. I hated to leave her, but I would be close. For Olivia I would always be there. The last few days had bonded us in a friendship that would never fade.

My brothers were all sat together, quietly talking in the lounge when I walked in. It was unusual for the five of us to actually be all in the same place anymore. I worked crazy hours in the hospital, and Kade was just as bad in his job. He was a detective in the ‘Serious Crimes’ division of the CPD and he had worked his ass off to get there. He was young to have made detective at just twenty four years old and we were all really damned proud of him for doing it.

Kyle had been in the military until twelve months ago, and we had barely seen him at all during the four years he served. After he had been injured in an explosion and watched many of his team die, he had decided to get out, I knew it had fucked him up. He was no longer the light hearted joker he had been growing up, but he was trying to deal with it and we were all giving him the space he needed to do so. That was the reason

it had been almost a month since I last saw him though, and I was relieved to see him there and looking much healthier than the last time I saw him. He had some colour in his face and had gained some weight, mostly muscle of course.

There wasn't one of us who didn't work our asses off in the gym on a daily basis. It was the way Grant had taught us all to channel our issues and it had really stuck, with every one of us.

"Xander, how is she?" Cole asked the second he saw me approaching.

"Sleeping." I replied. "She was exhausted. She's going to tire easily like that until she gets stronger." I walked over to Kyle and he stood to hug me. It had been too long since we saw each other. We shared a back slapping hug and I was relieved to feel he was much more solid in my arms. Just a month ago he had been way too thin.

"You look good, man." I told him as I stepped back.

"I'm doing better." He agreed.

"Glad to hear it." We both took a seat on the sectional and I waited for the questions I knew were coming.

"Xander, can you tell us what happened to her? Mom said she had been kidnapped and she would be jumpy, but she was terrified of everything?" Matt asked and I saw the worry in his eyes. He had come from a horrendous home, to us. It was why he had understood what Livy needed so easily earlier.

"I don't know very much. She has barely spoken, even to me. The cops tried to question her, but she just froze in terror the second they walked in. I threw them out and told them she wouldn't be speaking to anyone for a while." I explained and Kade nodded, likely having been dealing with the case already in some way. "She was taken eight years ago, disappeared on her way to school when she was nine years old. Two cops found her on the interstate, out near Shawnee, covered in blood and dressed in only a man's t-shirt. She was brought in and I treated her, then I was the first person to speak to her

after she woke. She, kind of, attached to me, then we found out her parents had died while she was gone, so I called mom.”

“Eight years?” Matt whispered as he lowered his head into his hands.

“Do you know what happened? Why he took her?” Cole asked.

“No, but I can tell you she has been through hell in that time.” I wouldn’t tell them the details of the scars I had seen that proved what she had suffered, it would break doctor patient privilege and Olivia’s confidence, but I needed them to understand just how delicate she was.

“Can she talk? Cole said she barely uttered a word earlier.” Kyle asked.

“She can, but my guess is her voice has very rarely, if ever been used in all of the time she was gone. It hurts her to talk too much, and it will take time for her voice to come back. It’s unlikely it will ever fully come back though.”

“Fuck!” Matt snapped as he stood angrily. “I’m sorry guys, I just.....I need a minute.” He was walking away as he spoke.

Cole moved to follow, but Kade stopped him with a hand on his shoulder.

“Just let him have some space. Tnis.....Olivia being here, it’s all going to bring back some painful memories for him.” Kade explained and Cole just nodded and took his seat again.

“Tell us what we can do Xander, to make it easier for her.” Kyle said after a few minutes of silence.

“Just go easy with her. Don’t touch her unless she allows you to. She’s scared and jumpy, but I’ve found since I got to know her a little, she craves human contact. She will likely hold on to you if she gets anxious, just let her. If you see her getting anxious, which she does, just reassure her a lot and try to ground her. She’s fragile and terrified, but there’s fire in her

too. She's stronger than she knows. We just need to show her that."

"We will, We're all here for her Xander. She's going to be ok." Kyle assured me.

"I know." And I did, because the men before me, along with my father were the greatest I knew. They would do anything to care for and protect Olivia until she was strong enough to do it herself, because they were all good men who would always do all they could to help anyone in need, and because they all had at least some first hand knowledge of what Olivia had been through.

"No loud noises either, right?" Cole added, looking a touch guilty.

"Right. She hates noise, but really loud noise sends her into melt down right away. She hides and goes into an anxiety attack. You need to try and keep things quiet for her until she adapts."

"You should know, because of her being here with us, I've been passed her case." Kade admitted sheepishly.

"Don't you fucking dare start questioning her Kade!" I growled instantly. "She's not ready to go through it all. She's terrified. You could break her if you try to push." My chest was heaving as rage instantly filled me at the thought of him cornering her with a ton of terrifying questions just to solve a fucking case.

"Jesus Xand! Who do you think you're talking to? You know I would never do that. Have you forgotten where I came from? I know how fucking scared she must be!" He snapped back, and he was right to do so. I had been an ass.

"I know. Shit! I'm sorry bro." I sighed as I forced myself to take a breath. "I just....I'm the only one who has been with her for three days. She's so small and so scared and alone. I've just gotten really protective of her I guess." I tried to explain.

"She kind of has that effect. Matt was ready to throw Jenny across the room when Olivia freaked earlier and I was close

behind.”

“She needs to be protected for a while. She’s been shut away from the world for eight years, and before that she was a kid. People will take advantage of her if we’re not closeby.”

“Xander’s right. The press are going to be all over her as soon as they get wind of this story, and the kidnapper is likely still out there somewhere too.” Kade agreed.

“Then we keep her close, one of us is always with her if she leaves the house. There are enough of us that it won’t be an issue. We’ll keep her safe and do what we can to help her adapt to a new start.” Kyle added.

“I’m in.” Cole agreed.

“Me too, anything she needs.” I wouldn’t be there as much as the others, but I would visit as much as possible.

“Count me in too.” Dad said startling us all. We all turned and found him leant in the doorway, his arms folded across his chest. “She’s a part of this family now. We look out for her, just as we look out for each other.” He added, and we all agreed with a nod.

That right there, that instant, unquestioning acceptance, was the reason I had needed her to be with my family. They had her. She would be safe and nurtured with them and she needed that, just as the rest of us all had once upon a time.

CHAPTER 6

OLIVIA

I startled awake, the unsettling feeling of being watched terrifying me. For a second I panicked when I opened my eyes I would be back there, in The Darkness, *him* just stood waiting for me to wake up so he could hurt me more.

Terrified I opened my eyes urgently and sat up instantly on the defensive, ready for the first hit, or worse, touch.

“Hey!” A sweet little voice greeted. Shocked, I rubbed my eyes and looked again, but it was real. I wasn’t in The Darkness, and there was the prettiest little girl I had seen standing at the foot of the bed, watching me with interest.

I took a deep breath to calm myself and then it all came back to me, where I was and who the blonde little cutie before me was. Evie. She really was beautiful, with a round face and chubby little cheeks. Her eyes were wide and bright blue, just like her Dads. Her hair hung in curly pigtails from the sides of her head, and down over her pink floral sundress. She was beaming at me the whole time I just took her in.

“Hi.” I whispered back eventually.

“I’m Evie. You’re Livia, right?”

“Right.”

“You’re really pretty.” She pointed at me as she spoke, looking very cute.

“Thanks. You are too.”

“Mom said I wasn’t to bother you, but I’m not bothering you, am I?”

“No, it’s ok.” I agreed.

“Good!” She declared, then she ran around the side of the bed and leapt up, plonking down right beside me. It surprised me, but I wasn’t afraid, which was a first.

“I’m five. How old are you?” She asked as she studied me hard. I felt self conscious under her close scrutiny.

“Seventeen.”

“Are you going to be my sister? I have lots of brothers, but no sister.....yet.”

“I....I don’t know” I stuttered, “How about we be friends, f-for now?” I offered, not wanting to upset her. She thought hard for a minute, then smiled.

“Ok, for now.” She agreed. Then she reached up and ran a finger over my chin. “What’s this?”

I ran my own finger where hers had been and felt the scar left over from one of the times a beating had resulted in smashed glass, and I had landed chin down on a large shard. I pushed back the memory and focussed on the girl before me.

“I cut it.” I said simply.

“On what? It’s all white and shiny.” I had no idea what it actually looked like, since I dare not see myself in a mirror, but the scar was slightly raised and about an inch long from the bottom of my chin.

“On some glass. It didn’t heal all the way. That’s why I have that line.”

“Oh, like my knee! I hurt it riding my bike and Mommy said I have a scar now. You have a scar too?” She looked delighted with her realisation we matched. I nodded and she smiled brighter, if that was possible.

“I need to tell Mommy we’re the same!” She cried as she scrambled down from the bed. She ran to the door, then stopped and turned back to me. “You should come too. Everyone wants to have dinner.”

“You go. I’m coming.” I agreed with a nod. She smiled, then scampered off, leaving me to panic about dinner and the prospect of Xander’s whole family downstairs, waiting on me! They probably all thought I was a lazy ass, sleeping all afternoon.

I hurried from the bed and to the closet, to grab clothes. I pulled on a pair of black jeans, a bra and a pink t-shirt, all of which had still had tags on. I grabbed socks, from the dresser, to cover my battered feet, then quickly redid my hair on top of my head. I hated to think I had them all waiting for me below so I moved as fast as I possibly could and I found it helped, because I didn’t have time to panic about meeting all of them.

I left the room knowing I should have checked my appearance in a mirror, but still not feeling brave enough. I had to look better than I did earlier, that was for sure.

I got halfway down the long staircase before the chatter of a lot of people below reached me. They were talking quietly, but even so, it was a lot for me to process. I stopped where I was and took a few deep breaths, telling myself I needed to do this, I needed to get to know these people if I wanted to have a home with them.

“Livia!” Evie’s voice yelled, scaring me enough to jump. I looked down and found her at the foot of the stairs watching me, her hands on her hips. “Come on silly! Everyone’s waiting!”

“Sorry,” I whispered as I slowly started to descend.

“Evie, Mom told you to let Olivia be.” A deep voice said as footsteps approached. I looked down and saw Matt appear in the hall below.

“Livia said I wasn’t bothering her!” Evie pouted, but Matt just gave her a playful shove and she ran off towards the lounge.

Matt looked up the stairs to me as I neared the bottom. His eyes locked on mine and I knew, just knew, he was looking right into my soul.

“Sorry. Take no notice of her. No one is waiting on you like that. We wanted you to sleep as much as you needed. You don’t need to hurry.” He said with a gentle smile.

“I...I’m ok. I slept too long anyway.” I replied shyly.

“It’s good that you slept. You needed the rest.”

“The tea helped I think. Th-thank you. It was r-really good.”

“It’s a special blend I get from the herbalist in the city. I’ll get more next time for you, if you like?” I nodded and for the first time in so long, I felt an easy smile raise my lips a little at his kindness.

“Thankyou.” I added and he just nodded.

“You want to come through and meet the rabble?” He asked, pointing behind him to the lounge. I was at the bottom now, stopped on the last step opposite him.

“Rabble?”

“My brothers. They’re all here, along with Simon. It gets kind of boisterous when we’re all together.”

“Oh.” I was not ready for boisterous, but I knew I needed to get the meeting over with. Once I knew them all, it wouldn’t all be as terrifying.

“You don’t have to go in there if it’s too much.” He added when I hesitated.

“No....I can go in. I’m ok.” I took one more deep breath, then dropped from the last step. I set off for the lounge and Matt kept step with me, just ever so slightly ahead of me. I found his nearness more of a comfort than a worry, which I assumed was progress, right?

As soon as we stepped into the lounge, everyone turned from where they sat on the sofas and armchairs, to look. Eight sets of eyes, focussed on me. On instinct I reached out and grabbed the bottom of Matt’s blue button down in my hand, just as I had with Xander that morning. He looked at me, but didn’t say

anything. He just took a side step closer to me and I held on to his shirt tighter, able to get a better hold on it.

“Finally,” Evie cried, breaking the silence. “Can we *please* have dinner now?”

“Evie, manners please.” Keira said with a hint of warning from where she sat on the sectional beside Grant.

“But I said please!” Evie sulked.

“How are you feeling sweetheart?” Xander asked as he stood and hurried over to where I had frozen in the doorway.

“Better. The shower was good and I....I slept.”

“You look a lot better. Did you cut your hair?”

“I had to. It was bad....really bad.”

“Come and sit down guys.” Grant urged, but the guys both stayed where they were, waiting for my cue.

I nodded once and they both started moving into the seating area, staying either side of me. I still had a hold on Matt’s shirt and I knew I likely looked crazy doing it, but it helped. I don’t know why, maybe just the reassurance someone was with me and I wasn’t alone. Whatever it was, I wasn’t letting it go. Luckily Matt didn’t seem to mind.

He led me over to an armchair in the corner, beside the open fireplace and I shakily sat, knowing all eyes were on me. Matt perched on the arm beside me, close enough so I could keep a hold of him and Xander moved to the sectional directly opposite me. He sat beside a handsome dark haired, mediterranean looking man who was smiling at me. He had dark eyes and a soft, warm face. He was dressed in a navy three piece suit that looked really expensive, his matching blue tie loosened and the top buttons of his crisp white shirt undone.

“Olivia, this is my fiancè, Simon.” Xander introduced when he saw me looking.

“Very glad to put a face to the name Olivia.” Simon greeted kindly. He seemed nice and I instantly thought he and Xander seemed like a good couple.

“You too,” I replied.

“Did you sleep well Honey?” Keira asked. I looked across at her with a smile and nodded.

“Really well, thank you. I.....I think Matt’s magic tea helped.”

“He has me on that too Olivia. It tastes like shit, but it works.” A raspy voice said. I turned quickly, looking for the owner and was met with a pair of burning amber eyes. He was staring right at me as he spoke, taking me in, just as I was him. He had a thin beard, more like heavy stubble and it accentuated his perfect bow shaped lips. He had high cheekbones, almost pretty, but his body was a contradiction to that, all hard lines and rippling muscle. He had tattoos poking out from the short sleeves of his CPD t-shirt and when he reached up to push his messily wild hair from his eyes, the veins in his huge arms bulged. I had thought Cole was big, but this guy, he was even bigger, but in a much more scary looking way than Cole. I knew I should be scared of him. He could crush me like a bug, but I wasn’t and I had no idea why.

“Language!” Keira reprimanded.

“He has me on it too. Kade’s right. It does taste like shit Mom.” A second voice cut in, a laughter in his words. The second guy was sitting on the armchair in the other corner of the room opposite. He was tall, but much slimmer than the first. I could see well defined shoulders and biceps, but his waist was very trim. He had sandy blonde hair that was clipped close to his head and his eyes were crystal blue, like images of the ocean in foreign countries I had seen on TV as a kid. He was smiling as he spoke, but I saw pain behind that smile, pain I recognised, because I felt it too. He was wearing jeans and a black T-shirt with some kind of logo in the corner over his chest. Beneath the sleeve I saw a tattoo peaking, just a small one, not like the first guy. I couldn’t take my eyes off

him. There was something dangerous about him, the hawk eyed way he was taking in everything around him.

“Kyle! Small ears are present.” Keira pointed to Evie exaggeratedly as she spoke.

“I liked it.” I said as loudly as I could, not wanting to hurt Matt’s feelings any more, when he went to so much trouble. Besides, I had liked it. It tasted good. My voice was little more than a grating whisper, but everyone was listening closely and heard.

“Ignore them *Carina*. They just like to complain about anything they can.” Matt said with a smile.

“Thanks man.” The second guy laughed, and I couldn’t help thinking he was really handsome when he smiled. “I’m Kyle by the way.” He added when he turned that beautiful smile my way.

“And I’m Kade.” The first one said. I looked at him and he was smiling softly too. Yep, definitely something in the water!

“Hey.” I whispered lamely, knowing they were waiting for me to say something.

“Do you see it Mommy? It’s just like mine, right?” Evie said excitedly as she jumped from her Mom’s lap and ran toward me, pointing at my face.

Xander intercepted her as she ran past him, sweeping her up in his arms and dumping her on his lap. She squealed as he lifted her high, then swung her down.

“What are you pointing at half pint? Don’t you know it’s rude to point?” Xander asked as he juggled her up and down on his knee, making her laugh hysterically.

“But Livia’s my friend, so she doesn’t mind, right?” Evie looked at me with so much hope and excitement. I used to be like her once, surrounded by love, with no cause to ever worry about a thing. My days were filled with happiness and fun, my biggest concern which ice cream to pick after dinner at night. I had forgotten that version of me for a long time, but sat there,

looking at that innocent little child, it all came back and tears built in my eyes at the thought of the childhood I had been robbed of. I could never get that back. It was gone. No, not just gone. It had been ripped from me and replaced by pain, torture and so much loneliness.

“Livia?” Evie pushed, the smile dropping rapidly as she waited for my answer. I quickly took a breath and wiped my eyes quickly with the back of my hand.

“Absolutely we are.” I replied enthusiastically, plastering the best smile I could across my face. “We...we’ve even got the s-scars to prove it, huh?” I added when she still looked unsure. I was weird and awkward, I knew it, but I could push past it to make that little girl smile again.

“Yep!” She finally smiled wide again. “See, I told you Xander!”

“Oh, you did, did you?” Xander flipped her onto her back on top of his knee and began to tickle her mercilessly. She laughed and squealed loudly as she fought to escape and it was more than I could handle. Every time she squealed excitedly I heard my own screams that first night in The Darkness. It had been the most terrifying night of my life, the minute any shreds of the child I had been before were torn from me, along with my voice.

I pulled on Matt’s shirt and he looked to me instantly, with concern, as did the other four guys too.

“Bathroom?” I asked hurriedly. The squeals had quietened down, but not in my head. In my head reruns of my own terrorised screams were playing over and over and I was breaking into a sweat.

“I’ll show you, ok?” Matt asked as he stood slowly. I nodded and kept a tight hold on him as he moved past everyone and out of the room.

He walked me past the kitchen and through a door in the back, which looked to lead into a utility room.

“The bathroom’s right there.” He said as he pointed to a door that went off of the utility. As I moved to go in, he stopped me with a hand held just shy of touching my shoulder. I froze and looked up to him, only to see those deep soulful eyes filled with pain. “But please don’t go in there if it’s because you’re feeling anxious or upset. You don’t have to hide any of that *Carina*, not from us, and especially not from me. I know you don’t really know any of us, but we’re here for you. You are not alone anymore. You never need to be alone again now you have all of us.”

His words were spoken gently, and calmly, but they rang so very true. It was like he was making a pledge to me, his eyes never leaving mine as he spoke.

For a second I panicked looking down to my feet nervously, unsure what to do with that information. Did I even want this random new family? I had a family, once upon a time, a wonderful loving family. Now they were gone, wasn’t it wrong to replace them? And if I did, how did I know that I could actually trust these people? I felt like they were good. I had searched each of their faces for the Evil I was sure I would know well, and found none, but was I a reliable judge? I was a kid last time I was in the real world, a young kid who had been sheltered and protected from the evil within it.

I looked up to Matt again and as soon as I saw his eyes, the understanding in them, the need in his face to help, and the tense set of his body for me to let him in, I knew none of my stupid thoughts mattered. I just knew he got me. My own feelings were reflected in his eyes and I knew if anyone was going to understand my fears, anxieties and insecurities it was him. He wasn’t asking me to turn to him for some sick game or malicious purpose. He, like everyone I met that day, simply wanted to help, to be there for me and it was the revelation I needed to let go.

A sob burst out of me, as though it had been trapped there waiting to burst free for 2928 days. It was so violent it stole my breath from me and I just flopped forward into Matt, hoping he would just hold me and prove I really wasn’t alone.

Great heaving sobs kept on coming as Matt wrapped me tightly in his arms, holding me to his front. I just let it all out, all of the pain I had felt in those flashbacks of that first night. I cried for the childhood I now realised I would never get to live and the time with my Mom and Dad I had lost all because of The Shadow.

“It’s ok Olivia. I’ve got you.” Matt soothed gently as he just held me tight and let me be.

Time passed, I don’t know how much, but I was there a while, unable to stop the tears once they had started. After a while my legs began to tremble, exhausted. Matt must have realised, because he picked me up, lifting me clear off the ground without rearranging me. He sat on the floor in the utility room, tucking me into his front, on his lap. I settled there, the heat of his body all around me, soothing me and reassuring me I was safe, not on that cold damp floor, all alone.

Eventually I had tired myself out too much to cry anymore. My eyes were stinging and Matt’s beautiful shirt was drenched with my tears. I took some deep breaths to try and re-centre, and when I finally did, I looked up into the face of pure patience and understanding.

“Hey.” He said softly, a lazy half smile lighting his face.

“Hey.” I replied, a little embarrassed I had completely gone into meltdown all over him. He barely knew me.

“Feel any better?”

“Yes, thank you. I’m really s-sorry. I just.....Evie, those noises. It brought back bad memories and I couldn’t st-stop them.”

“You don’t need to be sorry, or explain. Just know that if you need me, I’m here for you, anytime. If you want to talk, or you just want me to be with you while you fall apart, anything *Carina*. I’ve been where you are and I got through it with the help of this amazing family. You can too.”

“But.....well, what if I can’t?” I asked through my last snuffles.

“You can. I know you can, and deep down, you do too.”

“How do you know, Matt?”

“Because you, like me, survived hell. We escaped that, we can overcome anything.” His words were intense, but true. What I survived had been some kind of Hell. What could life possibly give me that could be worse?

“Matt?” The door from the kitchen swung open and Xander popped his head around, looking down at us and studying me with worry.

“We’re good Xand.” Matt told him, his eyes not leaving mine.

“Livy?” Xander asked and I looked up to him and smiled, a genuine hint of a smile anyway.

“I’m ok. Tired.”

“Maybe you should head up and rest for a while? You look exhausted?”

“Good idea. Tell the others to get dinner without us. I’ll help Olivia up to her room.” Matt agreed.

“No.” I said firmly. They had all made the effort to come to dinner to meet me, the whole family, and so far all I had done was run away. I needed to try. Matt was right, I wasn’t as weak as I felt. I had escaped The Darkness, and *him*. I had gotten a life back. It may not be the one I left, but I needed to grab it anyway and make sure I found a way to own it. “I’m ok. I want to have dinner.”

“Are you sure? You’re really shaky?” Matt asked quietly. He was right, I was shaking a lot, but it was nothing new.

“I’m sure. . . . I want to meet everyone.”

“Ok. We’re all in the dining room when you’re ready.” Xander and Matt shared some silent eye contact talk, then both nodded and Xander left. In just the time I had been with them all, it had become very apparent the brothers were all very close. They seemed to speak to each other without words, and their

closeness had been clear to see, even in only the few minutes I had been with them all.

“You ready to go out there?” Matt asked after a moment of silence.

“I guess.”

“You don’t have to Olivia. No one will be mad or disappointed if you just head up to bed. We all know you need time.”

“But I will. I’ll b-be mad. I need to try.....I need this. I c-can’t be alone.” I admitted.

“No matter what, you will never be alone. You are stuck with this crazy family now. We all look out for each other, always.” I took a deep breath and nodded, not wanting to speak, for fear more tears would escape.

I wanted that- people to look out for me, and who, in time, I could be there for, too.

“Come on. I made you more soup.” He urged and he grabbed me like I weighed nothing and jumped to his feet in one movement. He carefully set me down on the ground and I held onto his forearms as I got my wobbly feet underneath me, then nodded to tell him I was good. I knew I was likely a real state, from the crying, but since I was still too chicken to look in the mirror, there was little I could do.

“I am hungry.” I told him, as my stomach gurgled loudly.

“Good. I made you a thicker beef broth this time. It will fill you more than earlier”

“Thank you.....for the food, and the tea.”

“It’s nothing Olivia. I just want to see you happy and healthy.”

“Me too.” I sighed. Matt threw his arm over my shoulders and led me through the house to the large dining table we had sat at earlier that day. It was all set up for dinner, with beautiful flowers in the centre and set with 10 sets of shiny dinnerware.

“Livia!” Evie cried as soon as she saw me, causing everyone to turn and look. While Xander studied my shaking body with

worry, the guys all started looking from me to each other and to Matt, nodding and making faces to each other.

“S-sorry.....if I held dinner up.” I whispered, wanting them all to stop worrying.

“As long as you’re ok Olivia, that’s all that matters?” Grant said with a smile from where he sat at the top of the circular table.

“I am, th-thank you.”

“Come sit down Livy.” Xander pulled the chair beside him out and Matt walked me around to it, holding my hand as I shakily lowered into the seat.

“I’ll grab dinner now we’re all here.” Keira said as she stood. Grant followed her into the kitchen while Evie started talking a million miles a minute to Simon, who sat beside her.

“I’ll get you some soup, unless you want to try Keira’s meatloaf?” Matt asked. He was standing beside me, his hand still on my shoulder comfortingly.

“Soup sounds good. Thank you.” He nodded, then turned and headed into the kitchen too.

“I’m sorry about earlier. I should have realised Evie was going to get loud.” Xander said as he leant into me.

“She’s five. We can’t expect her to stay quiet. I....I’ll get used to it. It will b-be ok.” I told him, and myself firmly.

“Yes sweetheart. It will be.” He agreed with a smile.

“You’re so lucky Olivia. Matt has been making that soup all afternoon and it smells amazing. I wish I was having it instead of Mom’s dry meatloaf!” Cole whispered across the table to me, a mischievous smile on his face.

“No Shit! She almost killed me with that turkey at thanksgiving! It was dry as fuck. I damn near choked.” Kade added, making me smile a little with his dramatics.

“Why’s she cooking anyway? She said never again after thanksgiving?” Kyle asked.

“She wanted to give Matt time to meet Olivia, apparently. I think she’s punishing us for something.” Kade said.

“You guys are terrible. Her cooking’s really not that bad.” Xander defended.

“He would say that. He could burn water.” Simon cut in. The guys all laughed at Xander’s shocked face and I couldn’t help but smile too.

“You’re hardly Michelin star yourself!” Xander threw back.

“Don’t get all pissy. It’s ok. I’m not with you for your culinary skills”

Xander opened his mouth to reply, but Keira walked in with huge platters filled with meat and vegetables. She placed them in the middle of the table.

“Pass those down please Honey.” She said as she handed Simon a huge stack of plates. He started handing them out as Keira told them all to dig in. I had to stifle my laugh as they all collectively groaned quietly.

“I saw that smirk Liv!” Cole said, playfully.

Matt came up behind me, appearing on my right side. He placed a bowl of steaming soup in front of me. It was thicker and looked to have tiny vegetable pieces in it. It smelled amazing and my stomach rumbled in response.

“Try that. It’s ok if it’s not good though. I have soup from earlier that I can reheat for you.” He said kindly, then took the seat beside me.

“It smells r-really good.” I told him, with a smile, then I couldn’t help but glance at the guys who were all staring at me with longing looks.

I took a spoonful, and groaned in delight. I couldn’t hold it in. The soup tasted amazing, a flavour explosion in my mouth and I was suddenly ravenous.

When I glanced up the guys were eating their meal, with little enthusiasm.

“This is sooooo good Matt.” I enthused, glancing up to the guys a little to see their reactions. It felt good to act like a child, to tease and laugh. I had forgotten just how good it was for a person’s soul.

At first they all just stared at me, as if trying to decide if I was making my comment for their benefit. They obviously didn’t think I was capable of joking around, but I was. As a kid I had always loved to make people laugh, idolising my dad who was a complete prankster. We used to set my mom up all of the time, but she never got mad, we’d all just end up rolling around in laughter afterwards.

“Oh I see how it is!” Cole declared after a moment, then started laughing. Kade and Matt were laughing too, as Kyle pointed at me with his fork, a huge smile on his face.

“You’re going to be trouble, aren’t you?” He asked jokingly.

“That she is Ky, that she is.” Xander agreed between chuckles.

It felt good, to be a part of something, even if it was just part of a joke, for a few moments. It gave me this warm feeling of family, and that feeling was enough to overpower some of the darkness that ran through my veins, and give me a moment of light for the first time since I was grabbed that morning so many years ago.

CHAPTER 7

I leapt awake again, for the third time. This time I was sweating, my PJ's completely soaked through and my hands were shaking wildly. I had been trapped in another nightmare and it had taken everything in me to tear myself from it and back to reality. It seemed every time I closed my eyes I was back in The Darkness, back to feeling *his* boots smashing against bones, his hands gripping my neck, his knife touching my skin. I couldn't do it anymore. I couldn't let myself go back there. It was only four AM, but I decided I had slept enough. I wasn't strong enough to have another nightmare. I was holding on by a thread as it were.

As I lay, gasping for breath and trying to calm myself down, I realised it may have been a good idea to accept one of the offers the guys had all made to stay with me in my room that first night.

They had all been so nice at dinner, making me laugh as they told stories about when they were kids, and checking if I needed or wanted anything constantly. Matt and Xander both stayed close all night and we all had fun. I ate Matt's soup, which I loved, and felt better for it, then Cole managed to convince me to try a little ice cream afterwards. It too had been good, so good. I had forgotten how much I loved sugar of any kind.

After dinner I was exhausted, but I followed everyone into the lounge and sat on the sofa between Xander and Matt as we all watched the Disney movie Evie was desperate for me to see.

At first I had maintained a gap between the guys and me, but as the movie went on, Xander cuddled into Simon, who sat at his other side. Feeling exhausted I started to drop off and found myself drooping toward Matt as sleep tried to claim me. I kept on startling myself awake every time my head touched his chest, and sitting up with an apology, but Matt put an end to that after the third time, wrapping an arm around my shoulders and leading me to lie down with my head resting on his hard chest. He kept an arm around me, surrounding me with his heat as he had earlier and I just felt so safe and cocooned, that I allowed myself to relax. I knew it was weird. He was practically a stranger and just hours before I had been terrified of him, of all of them, but that had changed. I didn't know what they did or said, but something had made me know, without doubt, all of the people in that room, that huge family, were safe. I felt comfortable with them, at least on a basic level. I wasn't sure I was ready to go and hug Kade, Kyle or Cole, but I was happy to be close to them and could try and talk with them. Keira and Grant had been nothing but kind and welcoming and I felt they wanted me there, which was a huge comfort. Simon had been great too, keeping a distance from me, but trying hard to chat and get to know me. He was a good man, it was easy to see, and I really liked him. And Matt and Xander had somehow become my stability in the storm. I felt most comfortable with them, needing them close whenever the dark thoughts started to seep into my mind as they often did.

All of the guys had offered to stay with me once the movie finished and I decided I should go to bed. I had slept on Matt for the last half of it, and had been more settled than I ever remembered being.

I had really wanted Matt or Xander to stay with me, almost said, 'yes please', but Xander didn't even live there, and he should go home with Simon, and Matt, I just felt this need to protect from my hell. When I assured him I would be fine, all I was thinking was if he heard me crying out, and begging for it to stop in my sleep, it would bring back memories for him,

that I did not want him to have to relive. So I simply thanked them all, assured them I'd be fine and went up to the beautiful, but very lonely room, alone.

That had been at nine PM and since then I had been tossing and turning, then every time I did drop off, I woke up shortly after in the grips of terror.

Frustrated with my own weakness, I threw the comforter back violently and stormed out of bed. I needed to get it together, find a way to deal with what had happened and move the hell on. I wasn't a little girl trapped in the dark anymore. I needed to find the new, hopefully stronger, version of me, whoever she was.

I stripped off my PJs and took a quick shower, relishing the luxury of the clean, hot water once more. I knew for most people it was an everyday task that they took for granted, but I knew I would never do that. Being able to wash anytime I wanted or needed would always be a precious gift to me.

Once I stepped out, I contemplated looking in the mirror, actually seeing who I was, but I just couldn't. I was so scared the girl looking back at me would be a complete stranger. I felt disconnected enough, I wasn't sure I could handle seeing a stranger look back at me in the mirror.

Like the coward it seemed I was, I quickly brushed my teeth, then left the bathroom, the mirror still steamed, and headed to the closet. I pulled out another pair of the soft jeans that sat in a pile on the shelf, these ones black, and a grey hooded sweater with a tiny logo in the corner of the chest. They looked as though they would be comfortable and since I was exhausted and in for a long day, I figured comfort would be good.

I dressed quickly and ran a hairbrush through my badly cut hair. Seeing the oddly cut lengths over my shoulders, I knew there was no way I could leave it down, so quickly gathered it into a messy bun and pinned it there. It would do, I decided.

By the time I was ready for the day, it was almost five AM and I knew no one else would be up yet. It was an ungodly hour to be up and ready.

I decided to head downstairs and maybe find something to read. I had loved to read as a child, always with a book in my hand if I needed to entertain myself. It had been so long since I was able to get lost in some wild character's adventures and I wanted that. I needed to find a way to escape my head for a while.

I tiptoed down the hall and then down the long staircase. The house was completely silent and I hated it. Silence had been all that surrounded me for so long, it had been nice the day before, to constantly be surrounded by the constant buzz of conversation and laughter. The silence just made me feel alone again.

I got to the kitchen and filled a glass of water, taking a moment to appreciate the fact I was able to do that simple task. To have the freedom to just go to a faucet and fill a glass with clean, cold water was amazing. I could stand there and drink gallons if I wanted to. It seemed crazy after so many years of laying on the ground, desperate for just a drop to wet my agonisingly dry mouth.

"Never again." I whispered to myself, shaking away the memory. I was free, I had a home. I would never feel that crippling desperation again. I wouldn't let it happen.

I took the glass of water and headed past the lounge and into the hall, then through a door on the right which Matt had told me led to a gym, an office and a large media room. I walked quietly, peering in the door to the gym first. It was a large room with a huge TV on one wall and a ton of machines and weights against the other walls. It had a shiny tile floor and smelled of lemons. I imagined all of the guys working their asses off in there, building those huge muscles they all had, getting all sweaty and gross.

Squirming at strange new feelings I didn't recognise, I closed the door and moved down the wide hall to the next. It was the

media room, I guessed. There was a huge screen on the front wall and two sectionals facing it. There were game consoles on the floor in front, and in the back corner sat an air hockey and a pool table. The room was huge and had wide doors that lead out to the garden. I took a step in, thinking there may be books in there, then stopped when I heard snoring. The room was barely lit, just a small lamp beside the smaller sectional, but as I stepped closer I saw Kade, sprawled awkwardly in the corner, fast asleep. He was still dressed in his jeans and CPD shirt and his hair was sticking up even more wildly than earlier. There was a backpack at his feet and he had papers on the table before him and on the sofa around him.

I turned to leave him, not wanting to wake him when he looked so settled, but stopped when one of the papers caught my eye. It was an entire sheet literally packed with tiny numbers and letters, rows and rows of them typed in tiny writing. It was the numbers that had caught my attention though, I had loved number puzzles once, and this one looked insane.

I picked the sheet up from where it sat beside Kade and studied it. It was hard to see the tiny font in the dark, but it seemed the numbers formed a decreasing pattern, shrinking smaller and smaller to a last number. There were a ton of those on the sheet, mixed between random letters and symbols.

Feeling excited to do something challenging I took the puzzle from Kafe and quietly left the room. Next door I found an amazing office with walls lined with rows and rows of books, but that interest was forgotten as I studied the puzzle in my hand excitedly.

A huge desk sat before the window and I distractedly took a seat behind it, pulling the tiny cord to turn on the desk lamp. I found a lined legal pad and pen at the side of the immaculately tidy desk and set to work on the puzzle.

My mind flared up like a fire that had been sat, just waiting to be lit for so long. Maths had been my solace in The Darkness. I had spent hour after hour mentally running through times

tables, number sequences, square roots, equations and so much more. Over the years what had started out as something I had a definite acuity for, had turned into almost an obsession for me, but I hadn't had a puzzle like the one before me in so long. The numbers swirled in my head as I worked through the patterns to decipher the lowest numbers for each section. My hand wrote wildly as I worked through the complicated codes. I was engrossed, lost in numbers as I used to be as a child. It was a peaceful heaven I had forgotten I used to be able to retreat to, for fun, not just to escape fear. There had been no peace in The Darkness. Math would get me through the darkest hours, but it had become a necessity there, something to keep me focussed and alive.

Sat in that office, working that puzzle simply because I wanted to, it reminded me of what it had once been like to have a happy place, and I slipped back into it so easily.

When I was finished I was left with 18 single digit numbers. It had taken me an hour to decipher the codes and work down the patterns. I had been fully engrossed. Needing to keep going and feel the release the numbers gave me, I looked through the puzzle again, trying to make sense of the numbers and symbols that remained. I quickly realised they formed equations, with a simple letter to number cipher that denoted the numbers needed, and the 18 numbers I found previously were the main constant in each equation.

I started writing them all out, page after page of equations and my workings for each beneath. I was completely lost to the magic of the numbers then, working out each section and writing the final figures on a seperate sheet.

“Olivia? You ok *Carina*?” Matt’s voice came from nowhere, completely startling me from the writing I had been engrossed in. I looked up with a squeak, and found him standing before me on the other side of the desk. He was dressed in grey shorts that reached his knees and a tight black tee, his hair in disarray. At some point the sun had come up around me, now shining brightly through the window. I looked at the clock on

the desk, confused, and was shocked to find it was after nine. I had been so engrossed I had zoned out completely.

“Hey Matt.” I greeted, trying to pull myself back to reality.

“What are you doing in here? Couldn’t sleep?” He asked.

“I slept some, but I woke early.” It wasn’t a lie. “Is.....is it ok to be in here?” I asked nervously.

“Of course it is. It’s mainly Dad’s office, but we all use it for homework and stuff. What are you doing?” He looked at the pages I had sprawled across the desk. There were tens of them in piles all around me, all covered in my wild scrawls.

“I was looking for a book, but I.....I found this puzzle and I.....I kinda like numbers. I guess I got carried away.” I explained shyly.

“That’s cool. I suck at Math.” Matt laughed. “You should talk to Cole. He likes puzzles and code breaking. I’ll bet he has some books and shit you might like.”

“I’ll ask him. Thanks.” I smiled, realising how much fun it would be to have someone else who was as into math as I was. As a kid, no one even understood the math puzzles I used to do, and in time I realised I was different because of my interests, and hid them away, working on the puzzles only at home.

“Where’d you find that anyway? It doesn’t look like any puzzle I know?” Matt asked as he looked at the sheet I was working from, right in front of me.

“Well, it’s Kade’s.” I admitted sheepishly. “He w-was sleeping and I just saw it on the sofa. I didn’t think he would mind. I d-didn’t write on it or anything.”

“Kade?” Matt asked, his smile dropping as he grabbed the sheet and started studying it closer. “You got this from Kade?” He asked more urgently.

“I’m really sorry. I shouldn’t have...” I began frantically. I shouldn’t have touched it. It clearly wasn’t mine.

“Olivia, breathe. It’s ok. No one is mad. It’s just, I don’t think this is a puzzle.” He said as he looked from the sheet to me.

“It is. I’ve almost solved it.”

“What? What do you mean? You know what this means?” He asked as he held it up to me. I nodded nervously and held out the sheet of five sets of eighteen or nineteen digit numbers I had already solved. There was one more to complete.

“There are six different problems. I have the answers to five.....I think.”

“Where is Kade?” He asked.

“He was in the room next door. He w-was asleep though.”

“Fuck! Come with me.” He said, clearly frustrated. I was nervous by the way he was acting, but stood and took his offered hand. He smiled briefly as he pulled me around the desk and into the hall.

“Kade! Wake up!” Matt said loudly as he pulled me into the media room, now lit by the sun through the huge sliding doors. Kade looked even more uncomfortable than he had earlier, one foot on the floor and his neck at an awkward angle against the back of the sofa.

He started to stir as the door opened behind me and Kyle walked in, also in shorts and a navy tank. His biceps were on show and he looked really good, all tan ridges and sculpted muscles. He was slimmer than some of his brothers, but beautifully toned.

“What’s going on?” He asked as he walked in, throwing me a wink which instantly had my cheeks flushing hot.

“Yeah, what the fuck is going on? Some of us were up half the night working.” Kade groaned as he sat up and stretched out his neck.

“Olivia knows what this shit means.” Matt said as he waved the puzzle sheet at Kade.

“What? Where the fuck did you get that?”

“I’m sorry. I....I took it. I just wanted to do the puzzle.” I apologised tearfully. He was mad and I felt terrible for taking his things.

“It’s ok Liv. He’s not mad. You’re ok.” Kyle said as he took a step forward so he stood at my side, so close his heat made my skin prickle.

Kade studied me for a second and took a deep breath. He ran a hand through his hair, pushing it back against his head.

“He’s right love, I’m not mad.” He said. “It’s just that letter, it was sent to the police department by a serial killer we’ve been chasing for weeks. Our techs have been working on it, but so far they haven’t deciphered the code.” He explained.

“It’s not a code.....well, not really. More like equations” Kade looked up to me with shock.

“You really know what that shit means?” He asked.

“I....I think so.” I took the sheet from Matt and moved over to the table. I knelt down on the floor opposite Kade and placed the sheet before him. “These strings of numbers here..... they’re decreasing patterns that lead you to single digit numbers. The rest is a simple letter to number cipher. The numbers f-from the patterns fit into each section, finalising the equations. I....I think I solved the first five.” It hurt to talk so much and my voice was barely coming out at the end, but it seemed important.

“Here,” Matt said as he handed the sheet with my answers to Kade. Kyle was now sitting beside Kade on the sofa and they studied my answers.

“It may be wrong. I....I haven’t done a math problem like that since I was nine and definitely never one that complicated. I might be wrong.....It’s probably wrong.” I bumbled nervously.

“Shit!” Kyle gasped as they looked at one another.

“You’re not wrong.” Kade looked across at me with worry and confusion.

“The first six digits of these first two sets are the dates the first two murders happened.”

“Jesus Olivia! You’re a genius.” Matt gasped.

“What about the r-rest of the numbers? Each set is eighteen or nineteen digits long?”

“I don’t know, but these dates, they’re a huge step forward. The next one is three days from now.” Kade said.

“It’s GPS coordinates.” Kyle said as he pulled out his cell and started typing something into it. “Yep, the first one is downtown, where you found the first body.”

“Shit! This is huge! We know when and where. We can catch this fucker with this.” Kade said excitedly. He jumped to his feet and started shoving all of the pages into his backpack frantically.

“I....I can solve the last problem if it would help?” I asked.

“I need to get to the office, but I can leave you the page. This is amazing Olivia! You have just stopped a serial killer from hurting anyone else!” I looked up and found him watching me with an intensity I didn’t know what to do with

“I was just messing around.” I replied shyly.

“If you can solve that when you’re just messing around, I can’t wait to see what else you can do.” Kade laughed. He leant in and kissed my temple gently, then walked past me. “I have to go. Text me the last set of numbers if Olivia gets them.”

Once he was gone, Kyle, who was sat opposite me, and Matt who was crouched beside me, just stared, making me fidget nervously.

“So you’re really smart huh?” Kyle asked eventually.

“No. I just like math. My mom was a math teacher and she used to give me problems to solve for fun.”

“That is not just normal math. The CPD geeks couldn’t even solve it.” Matt cut in.

“I was always good at numbers. They just work for me.” I shrugged. It probably helped that math had been my only distraction for the last eight years too, but I decided not to bring that up.

“Yep, you’re really smart.” Kyle laughed as he stood. “I’m going to work out. You coming Matt?”

“In a minute. You go ahead.” Kyle nodded and headed out, throwing me another wink before he left

“Are you ok? That was all kinda crazy?” Matt asked once we were alone.

“Yeah....I think I am. I had fun with that math problem. It felt good to focus on something.” I tried to explain.

“That’s good. It helps to have something to focus on. I’ll ask Cole to find you some more to do, if you like?”

“That’d be good, thanks.”

“You ok to finish up what you were working on while I hit the gym?”

“Yes please.” I answered eagerly, making him laugh.

“Go ahead then *Chica*. I’ll come get you for breakfast when I’m done, yeah?” I nodded, my throat sore from so much talking. It had been a weird, but good morning. I had done something good, unintentionally, but still. And I felt comfortable with the guys around me. Maybe Xander had been right, Maybe I could make a happy new beginning for myself there, if I was willing to try.

KADE

“Kowalski, call a meeting. I’ve got something big!” I called as I hurried into the office. This was fucking huge! I had been working this case since the first body was found two weeks

ago in a hotel room downtown. Stabbed multiple times, the victim had been posed naked on the bed, the crime scene a blood bath. Forensics came back with nothing, no witnesses, no surveillance footage. The guy was a ghost and the case was a bust. Then five days ago the second body turned up, another motel, another bloodbath, but this one in a motel outside the city. There was nothing to link the victims, one a retired teacher and the other a young female IT technician. The only lead we had was the letter that had come from the killer. He was taunting us, trying to prove he was smarter than us, and until that morning I was starting to think he was right. Now it was obvious Olivia was smarter than everyone. I had no idea how she had gotten any sense from the page filled with line after line of random letters and numbers, but she had, and we had something we could actually use to catch the sonofabitch. If I didn't realise it before I knew it now, Olivia Byrd was special.

Everyone, including my Chief, who was desperate for a break in this case was gathered in the meeting room when I walked in with coffee and Olivia's page of numbers.

"What have you got Maxwell?" He asked from where he sat at the head of the conference table.

"Dates and locations for the murders.....the next three, and possibly four." I sat down as I spoke and handed the sheet over. John, my Chief studied it hard. He was in his early fifties, slightly rounded in the belly and completely bald on top. He was squinting through his black rimmed glasses, then looked up to me with confusion.

"Dates and GPS?" He asked. He was a smart man, almost thirty years on the job. He had taught me a lot of what I knew and I respected him greatly. I nodded my agreement as the other three cops around the table leant in to see the page too.

"How'd you get this?" John asked.

"I found someone who could decipher the letter." I answered simply.

“Who?”

“Does it matter? We have the date and location of the next murders. We need to get surveillance set up on the motel at those coordinates, make sure we’re ready to grab the guy.” I didn’t want Olivia getting involved in the case any further than she already was, hence trying to keep her name out of it as much as possible. She had been through so much, I just wanted to do all I could to keep her safe and protected.

“It matters if you’re going around showing critical evidence to everyone and anyone.” John snapped, annoyed by my evasiveness.

“It was my brother ok? I fell asleep working the file last night and he picked up the page. He’s a math whiz, and he solved it.” Cole was heavily into math and physics, that part was true and I knew he would prefer me use him that let Olivia’s name be thrown into the chaos.

“He gonna keep his mouth shut? We don’t need the media getting wind of this. They’re already going wild with the murders.”

“He’s my fucking brother!” I snapped, hating anyone daring to speak against my family. We had been through it all in school, the delinquent foster kids from the wrong side of town. None of us had ever been accepted by the stuck up kids at the stuck up school we attended. We were all damaged in some way, with huge chips on our shoulders and attitudes to match, but we weren’t bad. We worked hard and we were all pretty smart and we had each other, always. Kyle and I had been together, and Xander was the next grade up. We all stuck together and it was us against the world. Then Matt and Cole came along, two broken young kids, and they just fit into our family perfectly. We were tight, all of us and now we had Olivia too. It would always be us against the world.

“Good.” John nodded, obviously happy with my answer. “Get the motel set up for surveillance and have a response team on standby. Let’s get this fucker.” Everyone agreed and started to

clear out. I took back the page of numbers and stood, but John stopped me before I turned to leave.

“The Byrd case?” He asked.

“It’s going to take time, Chief. Olivia, she’s scared and fragile. I can’t push her to tell me anything if she’s not ready.”

“There’s a kidnapper out there Maxwell, likely eyeing up his next victim. We need to find him before it’s too late.”

“I will speak to her, get what I can, but not until I feel she’s strong enough. She’s been through hell. I can’t.....won’t force her to talk.” I said firmly.

“You’ve got two days, or I call her in to be interviewed. I know you want to protect her, but I won’t let that maniac take another innocent child, not in my city.” John said resolutely.

“I’ll do my best.” I agreed, knowing I would have to try. I needed to do whatever I could to stop her being brought in for interview. I knew that would be more than she could handle.

“Her medical report’s on your desk. The blood on her hands wasn’t hers.” John added.

“I’ll look into it.” I agreed as I hurried out and to my desk. I had been waiting for the report, especially after meeting her the day before and seeing how terrified and broken she had seemed. I knew it would hurt to see evidence of what she had been through, but I needed to know.

As soon as I opened the file my stomach turned and rage built within me. They had photographed her injuries and scars when she was admitted at the hospital and there were so many images of her battered body. She had heavy bruising around her ribs and down her arms. There were signs she had been restrained in some way around her wrists and ankles, and the scars! There were so many of them, mainly on her back and stomach, but they also branched out to her upper chest and there were several smaller ones on her face and down her legs. She had obviously been beaten repeatedly, with all manner of weapons as well as fists. It was a miracle she had survived at all. She was so small, probably not quite five feet tall and so

petite and delicate. The fucker who had taken her had tried hard to destroy her, but she had survived. I had no idea how, but she did and she got out. It was a miracle.

The last part of the report was the hardest to take in. The hospital had conducted a sexual assault forensic exam and found evidence of abuse, brutal sexual abuse over a prolonged period.

I had to slam the file closed, unable to breathe through the anger pulsing through my veins. How could anyone hurt her? She had been a damned child! An innocent child! My chest was heaving and my hands were shaking as I stood from my desk and hurried to the mens room. My stomach revolted and I threw up the coffee I had just drank. No wonder Olivia was as jumpy and nervous as she was. The fact she was functioning in any capacity at all seemed a miracle after what she had been put through for almost half of her life!

I splashed cold water on my face in an effort to calm down after I managed to stop heaving. I needed to find a way to process the anger, because I would be going home to Olivia that night, and I never wanted her to see me that way. She had seen enough hate and evil. I wanted to be there to show her there was good in the world. I wanted to take care of her and protect her as she should have always been.

I knew my feelings for her weren't necessarily brotherly. Even as pale and thin as she was, she was a beautiful woman and it was impossible not to notice. Petite and delicate, with those huge dark blue eyes that just sucked you in every time she looked at you. Her pale skin contrasted beautifully with her dark hair and when she smiled, it lit her whole face and her eyes sparkled. I had barely seen it happen yet, but what I had seen had me affected and I found myself just craving her next smile, thinking of ways to make her happy, to see that smile often.

Yes, Olivia Byrd had me already. I knew though, she was unlikely to be looking for a relationship anytime soon after everything she had been through, so I had fought my feelings,

curbing them as much as possible and telling myself all that mattered was that she knew I was there for her. The most important thing was keeping her safe and proving to her that she wasn't alone in this huge terrifying world. That, I could do.

OLIVIA

I was sat in the garden, sprawled on the grass in the back corner, hiding out behind the huge gazebo that dominated the space. It had been a good morning. I'd completed the puzzle and handed Kyle the last answer to pass on to Kade, then we'd all had breakfast, everyone except Kade, Xander and Simon.

Keira and Grant told me how their weekdays usually went since tomorrow was Monday. They seemed busy, dropping Evie at school and then they both worked quite long hours. The guys usually took it in turn to collect Evie after they finished school or work, then all ate dinner together, Matt usually cooking. Keira and Grant explained they tended to work late, but if I ever needed anything I only had to call and they would be there, which was extremely kind, but seemingly just representative of the good people they were.

"We weren't sure what you would want to do about school Olivia?" Grant had asked that morning. "We thought you would be too far behind to simply join Matt and Cole in their classes and were looking into online courses and a tutor, but after this morning I wonder if you may be able to catch up pretty quickly at school after all."

"I.....I don't know," I replied, panic rising within me. I used to like school before, but that wasn't me anymore and I hadn't opened a book in eight years. I had been smart before, working two grades ahead of my age in most subjects and much further ahead in math, but that was a long time ago.

I looked to Matt, who sat beside me, with confusion, knowing he would help me.

“We’re halfway through the semester now. Why don’t you start Olivia on the online classes, one grade back from where we are and see how she goes. If she catches up as fast as I’m sure she will, and feels ready, she could start classes at school with us for the next semester?”

“Maybe we could stay home to study with her too?” Cole asked with a hopeful look to his parents.

“While I am fully aware that’s just a ploy to miss school Cole, I’m also thinking it’s not a bad idea. Olivia may need some help along the way and I don’t like the idea of leaving her alone with a tutor none of us know.” Keira looked across to me, awaiting my opinion.

“I don’t want to disrupt your lives though guys.” I said honestly.

Kyle laughed loudly as he picked the last piece of bacon from the platter on the table and shoved it in his mouth. I looked from him to the guys and they both grinned.

“We totally hate school. We’ve been trying to convince Mom and Dad to let us do it online for years.” Cole explained with a bright smile. He always seemed so filled with happiness and excitement. He talked fast and never sat still, just bursting with life all of the time. I looked at Matt and he nodded that Cole was right.

“Ok.” I agreed simply. If they wanted to be home I wasn’t going to argue. I didn’t like the idea of being there with a stranger either, so this was a good option.

“Yes! This is awesome!” Cole cried excitedly.

“We will be on top of checking all assignments are done on time Cole. This is not a free pass to watch movies and work out all day, everyday.” Grant told him.

“We’ll make sure we keep up guys. Promise.” Matt looked at me with a smile as he spoke and I knew he was as relieved as

Cole that they had agreed.

After breakfast Grant had opened the iphone they had given me and showed me how to find all of their numbers, which were programmed in, so I could call someone if I needed to. He also showed me how to text, which I had never done before. We sent a text to all of the guys and Simon, telling them it was my number and instantly I had received replies from Xander, Simon and Kade.

Xander: Hey sweetheart. Call me if you need anything. I'll be there for dinner tonight x

Simon: Hey Olivia! Hope you're settling in. See you tonight ;
)

Kade: Thanks Einstein. I'll save it now x

I liked the way I could speak to them without much fuss or interrupting whatever they were busy doing too much, and I loved the phone. It was silver and so sleek and smooth in my hand. It gave me a security I had never had before, the ability to call someone if I needed to, if anything happened and I needed help.

Now I sat on the grass, the phone safely stowed in my jeans pocket. It had been a crazy morning and I had slipped into the garden just looking for a few minutes quiet. I loved having everyone around me, all of the chaos and happiness, but I was just so used to silence, it could become too much at times.

The sun was out, but the day was cold and windy. I was chilled, in just jeans and a sweater, my feet bare, but in a way I enjoyed that feeling. It wasn't like the crippling cold I had felt in that basement for all of those terrible days. That had been a cold that seeped through my body, right to my bones. Sat out in that garden, the sun beating down on me as the wind blew

strands of my hair loose, the cold was a comfort. It was a sign that I was free, out in real weather, my hands grasping real blades of grass. I had missed the outside more than I ever realised when I was trapped in The Darkness. I had stopped myself from thinking about it, from remembering, but now I had it in my grasp I couldn't imagine ever going back to not seeing the sky or the sun again.

My phone vibrated in my pocket, startling me from my thoughts. I pulled it out and smiled when I read the text.

Kyle: Hey Houdini, where are you? We playing hide and seek?

Olivia: Sorry. I'm in the garden.

I smiled as I replied, excited by this new way of talking to people. It was fun and I loved that I could talk to the guys, who I was becoming pretty attached to very quickly, even when they were working or busy.

“Olivia? Come out, come out, wherever you are!” Kyle’s voice cried a few minutes later. I smiled and waved when I saw him rounding the gazebo and headed toward me. He was wearing black slacks and a white shirt tucked into them. He had neatly styled his hair and had a suit jacket over his arm and a heavy looking grey coat in his other hand. He looked really handsome and I felt a fluttering in my stomach at the thought.

“What are you doing out here crazy lady? It’s freezing.” He said as he approached and wrapped his grey coat around my shoulders gently. The heat instantly felt good and I shivered loudly.

“I like it out here.” I replied as he shrugged on his suit jacket, looking even more handsome, but also with that edge of danger I found so appealing in him.

He sat down beside me, leaving just an inch or two between us. “You look nice.”

“I have a security job this afternoon, some fancy party for rich people.” He sighed. He sat with his knees raised before him, his arms resting casually on top.

“Aren’t you guys kinda rich?” I asked, looking around at the huge house before me. He laughed and turned to me with a smile.

“I guess Mom and Dad are, but that’s different. They’re not douchebags like the people I’ll be babysitting today.”

“You’re like a bodyguard?” I asked, unsure.

“I work in private security, so we do all different kinds of jobs. Today I guess I’m acting as a bodyguard, but we also do investigations and assignments for the government. It’s kind of why I like it. No two days are ever the same.”

“Is it dangerous?” I worried about him being in danger. I only just found these guys. I couldn’t stand the thought of anything happening to them.

“Not if you know what you’re doing, and I do. I was an Army Ranger. I’m well qualified.” He said confidently, making me feel a little better.

“But you’re not in the military anymore, right?” I asked hoping I didn’t sound like an idiot.

“No, not anymore, Princess.” He replied with a sigh.

“Was it bad? Is that why you have so much pain in your eyes?” I asked, needing to know. He turned and looked at me again, all of his pain there to see so plainly. “Sorry,” I added, realising I shouldn’t have asked that.

“It’s ok. I just....I don’t like to talk about it.”

“I get that.” I agreed. It wasn’t like I was ready to discuss my issues. “So do you have a gun?” I asked, changing the subject.

“I do, but it’s in my car. I don’t bring it in the house, with Evie here.”

“Can you show me some time? I never saw one before.”

“I can take you to the range if you want, if you’re really interested, let you shoot it?”

“Really? That would be awesome!” I said excitedly.

“Definitely. We can go sometime next week if you’re feeling up to it? There’s a shooting range not far from here.”

“Thanks Kyle. I’d really like that.” I agreed.

“I’ll arrange it and let you know.” He said with a smile. “I need to make a move. Are you going to come inside? You look frozen.”

I nodded my agreement and watched as he moved his huge body in one smooth movement to get to his feet. He reached a hand out to me and I tentatively took it, allowing him to help me to my own feet.

“Thanks.” I whispered shyly once I was up. He nodded, but didn’t release my hand. Instead he held it and led me across the lawn, and into the kitchen.

I could hear Cole and Matt in the lounge talking loudly and Evie laughing with them. Keira was sitting at the dining table on her laptop and I guessed Grant was still in his office working too. It was nice to hear the sounds of a family home around me.

“You going to be ok?” Kyle asked as he studied me where we stood opposite each other just inside the wide glass doors.

“Sure. I found a book in the office earlier. I’ll read that.”

“Try and rest too. You look tired again.”

“Sleep doesn’t exactly mean rest for me.” I blurted, then wondered what the hell had made me tell him that. I knew they were already worried about me, I hadn’t wanted to make it worse.

“Nightmares?” He asked with concern. I nodded, knowing it was too late to lie now. “Ask Matt for some of his shitty tea. It tastes like crap, but it does help.”

“Ok.”

“I’ll be home late, but I’ll check in on you. That ok?” He asked.

“You don’t have to.”

“I want to.” He said firmly.

“Ok. Thank you.” He nodded in that stoic way he did, then smiled a little for me.

“See you later Princess.” He placed a kiss on the top of my head, then turned and left. I just stood, still wrapped in his coat, trying to take in his kindness toward me. It was more than I ever expected and it filled me with hope.

After Kyle left, I made my way to the media room and settled into the huge sofa there with the copy of ‘Sense and Sensibility’ I had taken from the office that morning. Keira had suggested it may be one that I’d enjoy, so I had agreed to give it a try. Two hours in and I was engrossed, swept up in the characters and the drama. I loved Elinor’s strong character, the way she held her crazy family together, I wished I could be that strong.

“Livvy?” I looked up and found Xander before me, dressed smartly in a tailored navy suit and a baby blue shirt, open collar, underneath.

“Hi Xander.” I greeted cheerfully. I had missed him.

“How are you doing sweetheart?” He asked as he walked over and sat next to me. I pressed into him and felt happy when he wrapped his arm around my back.

“Good, I think.”

“Matt told me about this morning, with Kade’s case. That was good work you did.”

“I didn’t mean to. I saw it and I just thought it was a puzzle.”

“It’s good that you solved it Livvy. You’ve likely saved several lives by giving Kade and his team those numbers.”

“I’m doing online classes too. Grant is going to set it up and Cole and Matt are staying home with me.” I explained I was kind of excited to restart school work. It was so long since I really engaged my brain, and after I got a taster that morning, I wanted more.

“That’s good. You’ll catch up in no time, I’m sure.”

“How was your day? You were working, right?”

“I was. It was crazy busy in the ER today too. I haven’t stopped. I was just relieved to leave”

“Is Simon with you?”

“Yep. He’s entertaining Evie as we speak. You going to come and have dinner with us all?”

“Of course, though I’m not very hungry. Matt’s been bringing me snacks all afternoon.” I laughed. Now Matt knew I could be tempted with sugar, he had been bringing me all manner of baked goods.

“Good. You need the calories.” Xander pulled me up and held me close as we walked to the kitchen together. Everyone was sitting at the dining table, except for Matt who was working away in the kitchen.

“Hey sweetie.” Simon greeted me when I walked in. He looked so different from the night before, this time dressed in dark jeans and a green hooded sweater with ‘HARVARD’ emblazoned across it.

“Hi Simon.” I replied with a smile.

“How are you feeling? He asked as Xander led me to the seat beside him. I sat and Xander sat next to me.

“Better, Matt’s been feeding me up.” I joked.

“That’s good. You look better. You have more colour.”

“How’s the book?” Keira asked. She was sitting opposite me, Evie at her side and Grant sat at Evie’s other side.

“Brilliant! I’m really enjoying it.”

“I thought you would. It’s one of my favourites.”

“What are you reading?” Xander asked. I lifted the book, which I was still clutching, and showed him.

“Reading for fun! You disappoint me Brains,” Cole groaned.

“Brains?” I questioned.

“After this morning, that is totally your new nickname,” He said like it made complete sense.

“There’s a pretty good movie you could watch once you’ve read the book Olivia. It’s not as good as the book, but still worth a watch.” Keira said, ignoring her son.

“Oh, ok.” I agreed. I would love to see the characters come to life once I had finished reading.

Matt brought us all out plates heaped with steaming pasta and a ton of salad and bread for the table.

“I kept the sauce light for you *Carina*, but if it’s still too much just tell me and I’ll make you some eggs instead.” He explained as he placed a smaller serving in front of me,

“Thank you Matt.” He was too good to me. I found it overwhelming.

“Where are the others?” Xander asked as we all started eating.

“Kade’s working that case now Olivia solved it for him, and Kyle has a job.” Grant answered.

“I made them both plates for when they get home.” Matt added and I marvelled at how thoughtful he was.

“Kyle seems a lot better.” Xander commented and I listened more closely, wanting to know what had happened to hurt Kyle so much.

“It’s that new job. The owner was a marine and he and Kyle worked a few missions together in Iraq. When he heard about the botched mission and Kyle’s team, he got in touch and offered him a job. Kyle turned him down, but this guy, Rob, he wouldn’t give up. I don’t know how he did it, but he got

through your brother's thick skull and spoke some sense into him. He's just been doing better and better ever since." Grant explained. I wondered what had happened to make a 'botched mission'. Whatever it was, it didn't sound good. Had Kyle been hurt? I was desperate to ask, but I didn't want to interfere in things that weren't my business.

"That's great. Let's hope it's enough to keep him moving in the right direction." Xander said and everyone nodded.

"He's tough. He'll come through this." Keira added hopefully, and I watched as Grant leant over and held her hand in his supportively.

"I'm tough too. I can do karate, Kyle showed me!" Evie declared, making everyone laugh.

"Yes you are pumpkin, but please remember we do not use those moves Kyle taught you in the playground, right?" Keira asked with a hint of scorn.

"Tyler deserved to be kicked. He pulled my hair!" Evie cried defensively.

"That's right Evie. You were defending yourself. Never let people hurt you." Cole agreed wholeheartedly.

"Cole!" Keira snapped as she glared at him.

"He's right Mom. All that 'use your words' is crap. Evie needs to know it's alright to fight back if she needs to." Matt agreed.

"Oh great. You boys go and tell that to the principal next time Evie gets in trouble for fighting then."

"We will if we have to." Cole replied flatly.

I looked to the little girl in question, a huge smile on her face, feeling very satisfied that her brothers had her back. They were right of course. Would I have been taken if I had been taught to fight back?

It had been just like any other morning as I left my mom at the door of our home and walked the short five minute route to school. I had done it a ton of times before. We lived in a safe

area and most of the kids walked to school on their own, or in groups. I was practically skipping down the street, my pink butterfly backpack strapped on my back and my hair tied in curly little bunches, just like Evie's. I had been excited to get to the playground to meet my best friend Sarah. We had planned to sign up for the talent contest. I was going to play piano and she would sing. I reached the end of my street and was waiting to cross the small road when a hand had clamped down over my nose and mouth and the other lifted me clear from the ground.

I tried to scream, but it was muffled by the filthy, sweaty smelling hand. I started to struggle, squirming in the grip and bucking my body, but I was tiny, even smaller than the average nine year old. In a matter of seconds I was thrown into the back of a van, hard. I banged my head on something hard and things were fuzzy for a few minutes. By the time I came to, the van was moving too fast for me to try and jump out. Terrified and hurting I had curled up in the corner and cried hard, as The Shadow drove me to my own personal hell.

“Olivia?” A hand touched my shoulder and I leapt, badly startled from the memory. I jumped to my feet, the seat smashing to the hard tile behind me, but I was confused and dazed. I stumbled back tripping over the chair and fighting to get away from everyone as I fought to take in a breath.

“Hey, Hey! Olivia, it's just me. You're ok!” Xander said as he leapt up and followed me. It took me several seconds to realise it was him. I looked around, seeing everyone looking at me with worry. Keira and Grant were on their feet and moving slowly toward me.

“I...I'm sorry.” I gasped when I realised what had happened.

“Just breathe Livy, nice big, deep breaths.” Xander said calmly.

“Mommy is Livia ok?” Evie asked frantically and I knew I was scaring her.

“I’m ok.” I told her quickly. “I....I need a minute.” I turned and ran from the room, not wanting to subject that poor child to my meltdown. I made it to the hall where I collapsed down on the bottom step of the staircase. I could barely breathe and I was shaking badly.

Footsteps hurried after me and when I looked up Matt, Cole and Xander were all there, watching me.

Xander crouched before me and took my hand slowly. I let him, needing the contact.

“Deep breaths.” He whispered as he met my panicked eyes. “You’re alright, you’re safe here.” He added calmly. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, then focused on the feel of his hand surrounding mine as I fought for calm.

Finally I managed to find some equilibrium and get a full breath in. More followed and the trembling eased off. The memories shrank back to their torture box, and I was able to, at last, open my eyes.

The guys were all looking at me with so much worry and concern and I hated that I had scared them, and myself, but I had no idea how to stop the frightening memories when they came crashing in.

“You back with us Brains?” Cole asked, his stupid nickname for me, making me smile.

“Yeah. I’m sorry. I got kinda lost for a minute.”

“You don’t need to be sorry *Carina*, as long as you always find your way back to us, that’s all that matters.” Matt said softly.

I nodded, hoping that would always be the case, but there was a fear deep inside, that one day one of those memories would be too much for me to bear, and I would snap, becoming lost in them forever.

“We should go back in. I...I’ve worried everyone.” I said as I stood on shaky legs.

“Just give yourself a minute. There’s no hurry.” Xander said as he steadied me with an arm around my back. I held onto him and took a deep breath.

“I’m ok now.” I assured them, then I moved from Xander’s hold and started back to the dining room, feeling embarrassed at the show I had made in front of everyone.

“Livia!” Evie squealed the second we stepped into the dining room. She was out of her seat and running at me. I braced

myself just in time before she hit me hard, throwing her arms around my thighs tight.

“Are you ok?” She asked as she held on.

“I’m absolutely fine munchkin.” I told her as I hugged her back awkwardly. “I’m sorry I scared you.”

“It’s ok. Sometimes the boys make me jump too. It’s really mean!” Evie glared up to Xander who stood beside me and I realised she thought he had frightened me when he touched me, which he had, but not purposely like she was thinking.

“Come and finish your dinner now, honey. Let Olivia sit down.” Keira said. I looked over and found her and Grant looking worried sick as they watched me closely. I nodded, hoping to reassure them and they both forced a smile.

Evie released me and we all went back to eating. I felt sick from all of the anxiety and couldn’t face the food any longer. I pushed it around a little, then as everyone finished up, I gave up. Everyone seemed much quieter after my meltdown, the conversation stilted and awkward. I felt bad, knowing it was my fault and as soon as Matt, Cole and Keira started to clean up, I made my excuses, grabbed my book and ran to my room to hide.

Xander came by to check on me a while later, but I assured him I was ok, just tired and he let me be. He and Simon had called in a while after that to say goodbye, promising to come back on Tuesday evening. I knew from the way Xander watched me he was worried, but there was little I could do to reassure him. There was no denying I was a damned mess. I told him I would text him, hoping it would ease his worry and he seemed better as he left.

An hour later, frustrated, I gave up on the book and dropped it on the bed beside where I lay out on my front. I was just so mad that I had let that memory attack me in the middle of that family meal. I wasn’t stupid. I knew it would take time for me to control the images and memories that were terrorising me. I couldn’t just shut them off, but I had to find a way to better

control them, especially when I was in front of everyone. They were all already being so good, allowing me to be there. I couldn't put them through even more drama with my mini meltdowns.

A knock at the door pulled me from my brooding. I sat up and wiped away the tears that had escaped.

"Come in."

"Hey," Cole greeted as he opened the door a little and looked in, with an unsure smile. It looked weird on him. He always seemed so sure, cocky even.

"Hey."

"I don't want to bug you. I just wanted to check in." He stayed mostly behind the door, his head just poking in.

"You're not bugging me." I said with a smile of my own. He was cute and sweet.

"Oh Good." He declared as he came into the room, closing the door behind him. "Matt told me I should let you have some space, but I was worried about you." I realised then that was why he had been so unsure. Matt had told him not to bother me.

"I'm ok. I'm sorry if I scared you before."

"What happened? You were just zoned out, then when Xand touched you, you freaked."

"It was a memory.....like a flashback. It was the day I was taken. I couldn't get out of it, then Xander touched me. He pulled me back, but I was confused and scared." I tried to explain.

"Does that happen a lot.....the memories, I mean?" He asked as he walked past me to the top of my bed and climbed up. He sat back against the pillows, his head rested on the headboard and his knees pulled up in front of him. I turned to face him, my legs crossed in front of me. I was sat at the foot of the bed, opposite him.

“I guess so, more since I got away.” I admitted.

“It’ll get better. Matt was the same when he came here. He still has nightmares occasionally, but most of the things he struggled with eased over time.”

“I guess.” I agreed half heartedly.

“What’s wrong? You can talk to me you know? I know I act like an ass most of the time, but I’m here for you.”

“You’re not an ass.” I said firmly as I looked up to him, wanting him to see the truth in my words.

“So talk to me then?” He pushed. His dark eyes locked on mine and I felt like he held me with that gaze, held me until I opened up and told him the truth.

“What if I’m too messed up to ever be ok?” I asked shakily.

“Olivia, you’re already doing so well considering what you escaped. I can’t believe how far you’ve come since yesterday. When I first met you, you were hiding under the table. Now you’re sitting here with me alone, talking and opening up. I don’t think you realise how strong and resilient you are.”

“But inside I’m a mess Cole. I’m scared just constantly, and all of the images of.....of everything are playing in my head. As soon as I sleep, *he’s* there waiting to hurt me all over and when I wake up I’m a mess again. I don’t even know who I am now! Last time I had any kind of life I was nine years old. Now I’m all grown up, minus the actual growing up years, and I don’t know who that person is. I daren’t even look at myself in the mirror!” I cried, tears of fear and frustration escaping again.

“Come on.” Cole said as he jumped up and took my hand. He pulled slightly, but I remained frozen in place, confused.

“Where to?” I asked.

“I’m going to show you who you are.” He said simply. Scared, but comforted by the knowledge that I wasn’t alone, I went with him when he pulled again. He took me in the bathroom and stood me before the mirror, but with my back to it.

“I’m scared. I haven’t seen my face since I was a kid.” I told him tearfully.

“You’re not alone. I’m here with you.” He assured me. He had his hands on my shoulders and his huge body surrounded me completely. He was the bulkiest of the guys, but also the gentlest. I nodded once and turned fast, like ripping a bandaid off.

I gasped when I saw my reflection. The nine year old girl I had seen last was still there, my wide, dark blue eyes and a small nose that I had always hated, still just the same. My skin was pale and my complexion sickly looking, but I wasn’t hideous. My lips were a good shape, with a slight pout and I had high cheekbones. There was a scar on my chin, the one Evie had seen, but it wasn’t hugely noticeable. There was also a long line on my forehead where I hit a wall head first once in the early days, but it was faint. I was small, especially when I stood before Cole who was at least a foot and a half taller. My shoulders were slight and I was barely tall enough to see in the mirror, but I had always been on the small side and I guess eight years of little food, water or light hadn’t helped.

“You Olivia Byrd, are an extremely beautiful, amazingly smart, undeniably strong woman with a kind heart. You have been in this home for two days and everyone here already loves you.” Cole said quietly as I studied myself. “You have a scar on your chin and one on your forehead, symbols of your strength and ability to survive. You’re a pocket sized powerhouse, who has a brain built for numbers. You like to read *really* boring books and love to be outdoors. You eat real food like a sparrow, but sugar like a hungry bear.” Cole went on, making me laugh. “And that, for now is all I know, but it’s a good start. You have so much time to find out who else you are, and you don’t need to be scared of that because I know for damned sure, whoever you turn out to be, she is going to be very fucking special.” I looked up to his face in the mirror, studying his reflection as he studied me. His dark eyes were still locked on mine, pulling me in with a wild intensity. I turned hurriedly, needing to feel him close.

“Thank you.” I whispered as I wrapped my arms tight around his waist. My head barely reached his chest and I had to admit, I had never felt safer. He was just so tall and ripped, it was impossible not to feel wonderfully protected with him. He held me back, his arms wrapping around my back and holding me, his heat pouring into me

“You’re going to be ok beautiful girl, we’re all going to make sure you are.” He soothed and I felt for the first time, that he was really right, that there really was hope that I could find my way out of the darkness and into at least some semblance of light.

CHAPTER 8

COLE

I had stayed with her that night as she snuggled into bed to sleep. After she had told me how bad her nightmares were, there was no way I was leaving her. I sat where I had been earlier, leant against the head of the bed, holding her hand and quietly talking away as she laid down and slowly drifted off to sleep.

I had been so worried about her earlier when she had simply slipped away from us all at the dinner table. Matt had noticed first, saying her name over and over trying to get her attention, but she was gone. We looked to Xander and that was when he had touched her and scared her badly. She pulled it back, came back to us and got it together so well, but it had scared us all.

After she ran to her room after dinner, Xander had checked on her and told us she needed some time, and to leave her. Matt had agreed and told me not to bother her, but I had to. I was just so worried she was in here alone and upset. The thought had plagued me until I got up and came to her. Now I was glad I had. She had really opened up and I was pretty sure getting her to actually look in the mirror had been a good step forward.

The guys all saw me as the joker of the group, and I was, but I could be serious when I needed to be. I could be serious and sensitive for Olivia. She needed me, both sides of me, and I would be there for her.

I looked down at her, quietly snoring. She was curled up tight on her side facing me, her hand beneath her cheek. She was the opposite to me, small and dainty and so fragile. When I held her earlier, I had been scared I would crush her, but I knew she was tougher and stronger than she looked. She was a fighter and we all needed to make sure we remembered that. Yes we all needed to keep her safe, but we couldn't coddle her. She needed to keep her strength, she had fought damn hard to

earn it and she didn't need a load of overbearing men taking it from her.

The door to her room opened quietly and I looked up hurriedly from where I had been staring at her. I was pretty sure Mom wouldn't be mad I was in here, but I didn't want anyone to wake her.

"Kyle?" I whispered as I saw his outline in the dim light from the lamp beside the bed.

"Yeah. I said I'd check on her when I got home. How is she?" He asked quietly. He looked tired, his shirt pulled from his dress slacks and his suit jacket slung over his shoulder.

"She had a tough evening, but I think she's doing better." I told him. "She's been sleeping pretty soundly for a while now."

"That's good. You staying with her?"

"Yeah. She's been having nightmares so I want to be here, in case."

"Ok man. I'm going to bed, but grab me if you need anything."

"She is going to be ok, isn't she Kyle?" I asked, scared for her.

"We'll make damned sure of it." He said firmly, settling my fears.

"Night bro." I whispered with a nod of thanks. He nodded too, then left the room, closing the door behind him.

I lay my head back on the headboard and closed my eyes. I was exhausted, but there was no way I was leaving her. I'd just sleep there, staying close by and ready to fight that kidnapping fucker if he tried to get to her through her nightmares as she slept.

OLIVIA

My eyes shot open as I felt cold hands gripping my waist and swinging me into the air. I fought for a breath as I flew through the cold damp air, and landed hard against a crumbling wall. My arm hit the sharp stone and burst open, warm blood running down past my elbow and over my fingers. I looked up in time to see him, storming toward me angrily. He was pissed and that meant one thing. Pain. He crouched and hit me twice in the ribs on my right side, stealing the breath from me. The thought that this wasn't right knorred at me, but I barely had time to think as he grabbed my ankles and began dragging me to his torture table. My body shook violently with adrenaline as the desperate urge to scream and beg came over me, but I didn't. I didn't make a sound. It would only make things so much worse. The thought that this wasn't right hit me again and then a voice, a deep male voice.

“Olivia? Olivia, wake up beautiful. You're safe at home with me.” The voice said and then I was opening my eyes, this time for real. I looked up panicked and found Cole knelt on my bed at my side, his face leant in close to mine. I was shaking and fighting to breathe, my PJs once again soaked through with sweat.

“Cole?” I whispered confused.

“Hey you.” He said with a smile, forced though his panic. I tried to sit up and he quickly moved to help me, cradling my back with his huge arm. “I fell asleep. When I woke up you were like this. Are you ok? Can you take some deeper breaths?”

I nodded as I fought to convince myself this safe, comforting place was real, not The Darkness, not anymore anyway. I managed to get a couple of deep breaths in and the rest came easier after that.

“You stayed with me all night?” I asked when I realised the sun was up outside the window.

“I didn’t want to leave you alone after you told me about the nightmares.” He admitted. “I stayed at the top of the bed though.” He added in a rush, making me smile.

“Thank you.” I whispered gratefully. “I slept better with you close.”

“Then that’s all that matters. You ok now?”

I nodded, then added, “It was a good night. Only one nightmare. I can deal with that.”

“Then I’ll stay with you every night.” Cole offered.

“You can’t sleep sitting there every night. I’ll be ok, but thank you.”

“We’ll all stay. We can take it in turns. I’ll talk to the others.”

“You guys can’t do that forever.” I sighed.

“We won’t need to do it forever, but for now, until you start sleeping better, I think it’s a good idea. Will you be ok with one of us here with you?”

“It did help last night.” I admitted, knowing I had slept ten times better with Cole there than when I was alone the night before.

“Ok. I’ll talk to them. We’ll figure it out.” He said firmly. He had been so different since he came into my room that night. The fun, joking Cole was still there, but he was also so much more serious and take-charge. I liked that side of him too. He made me feel cared for and protected more than ever before.

“Thank you.”

“Anything for you, Brains.” He replied, making me smile. “I need to hit the gym for a bit, stretch my aching muscles. You want to come?”

“Exercise?” I asked with raised eyebrows. “No thanks. I think I’ll get some tea and read my book until you guys are ready for breakfast.” I had learnt the day before that all of the guys hit the gym before breakfast if they weren’t working, including Grant.

Keira, who hated mornings, stayed in bed as late as possible and Evie usually stayed in her room watching cartoons for as long as possible. But this was a weekday, so I guessed things would be a little different. The guys would still hit the gym, since Matt already told me they did that everyday, but I guessed Evie would likely be heading to school and Keira to work after dropping her off already. Cole and Matt had permission to stay home and study this week, even though I wasn't even enrolled until the week after. It was pretty obvious no one wanted to leave me alone in the house, not with the way I was flipping out every two minutes, hence why I had the guys home.

“Ok. Keira and Grant will have already headed out with Evie, so you should have peace. Matt will make us all breakfast once we finish up in the gym.”

“Sounds good. I'll see you down there.” I agreed.

“Ok beautiful girl.” He bent down and kissed my forehead, then left the room in a blur. I was so glad he had stayed that night and that he was going to ask the guys about other nights. I hated being alone, even as selfish as I knew it would be having them stay with me nights. I needed them though, at least for a while.

An hour later I was in the kitchen making green tea, just as Matt had shown me the day before. I had showered and dressed in leggings and a long black sweater. My hair, still wet, was braided over my shoulder and I was already back into my book as the kettle boiled. Elinor had just found out that Edward was to marry Lucy Steele and I was crying at her heartbreak, tears streaming down my face. I put the book down and took a deep breath, trying to compose myself as I poured the freshly boiled water over the tea bag. I was desperate for Elinor to get her happy ending. I needed a happy ending.

Feeling sure Keira wouldn't love a book that ended badly I picked up the book and my tea and headed for the sliding

doors out to the garden. I knew it would be cold, but the sun was shining and I wanted to feel the sun on my face, even if just for a little while.

I turned my back to the glass door and used my elbow to push the handle to get out, but it was locked and didn't open. The second I tried, a blaring alarm sounded through the house, scaring me badly. I dropped the tea, the boiling water splashing my bare feet as it landed with a smash. But I barely even noticed as I slammed my hands over my ears and went into my automatic panic mode, searching for a place to hide as adrenaline surged through me.

By the time I ducked under the dining table images of attack after attack were flying through my mind one after the other. I had my hands clamped tight over my ears, my knees tucked tight into my chest and I was rocking back and forth in an attempt to make myself feel safe, even though I was sure I wasn't. I was gone then, to a place of darkness, pain and terror.

KYLE

I had taken the day off that day, to spend some more time with Olivia and I was excited to see her. She made me smile and brought out the old me, more than anyone else had been able to since I lost my entire team almost a year before.

Seeing how strong and brave she was, gave me the strength to get my shit together and move forward. Not only that, but she was fun to be with, sweet and funny. I liked her a fuck of a lot.

"I'm done." Matt declared as he powered down the treadmill. He, Cole and I had been down there for about an hour, alternating between cardio and lifting. "I'm gonna grab a shower then I'll make breakfast."

"I'm almost finished too. Olivia said she was going to read until we were ready to eat." Cole told him. Matt nodded then headed out.

“How was she last night?” I asked as I jumped onto the treadmill Matt had just left. Cole was sat on the weight bench taking a breather.

“She said she slept well, but she was having a really bad nightmare just before she woke up. It was bad. She was writhing and fighting, her mouth open like she wanted to scream, but she didn’t. It was hard to see and it took me so long to wake her from it.”

“Xander said he thought she had been stopped from speaking, maybe he stopped her from screaming in pain too.” I suggested angrily.

“Fuck Ky! Don’t! I can’t....can’t think about anyone hurting her.”

“I know. I’m with you there. The sooner Kade gets this fucker, the better.”

“I told her I’d speak to you guys about one of us being with her at night while she sleeps, like take it in turns. She tried to say she didn’t need that, but she does and she wants it too. She’s scared of being alone.” Cole explained.

“Whatever she needs, I’m in. I’ll take tonight and we’ll talk to the others about working out a system. I’d feel better knowing someone was there in case she has nightmares anyway.”

“Me too.” Cole agreed. He laid back ready for the next set of reps when the house alarm started screeching loudly.

“Fuck!” I cursed as I slammed stop on the machine, leapt off of it and ran for the door, Cole right behind me.

“Check the front!” I yelled to Cole as we both sprinted into the entrance way. I had no idea if we were being broken into or if it was something more sinister, but I wasn’t taking a risk with Olivia and my family in the house.

I ran past the lounge and into the kitchen to check the back doors, but stopped dead when I saw Olivia’s book open on the floor beside a smashed cup and blood, drops of blood on the white tile floor.

“Front’s locked up. No one out there.” Cole yelled over the alarm as he ran in. “What the fuck? Where is she?” He looked as panicked as I felt, but I knew we needed to keep our cool.

“Go check the media room doors and all of the windows. If someone took her they haven’t gotten far yet” I ordered, terrified. I jumped over the mess and tried the doors to the garden, but they too were secure.

“Kyle? What’s going on?” Matt yelled from upstairs and I ran to the hall.

“Check all of the windows are secure up there and check every room. Olivia’s missing and there’s blood.” I yelled. I heard him running and went back to the kitchen. I looked at the mess before me again and tried to think straight. Is there some way her kidnapper knew she was here and came for her? Was that even possible?

“Kyle, the doors and windows are all secure back there. Has she been taken? Has he found her?” Cole asked frantically and I knew he was freaking out because I was too.

“Upstairs is clear. Olivia’s not up there.” Matt said between gasps as he appeared in the kitchen, soaked and dressed hurriedly in only a pair of shorts. He’d obviously been mid shower.

“We need to call the police and Kade!” Cole cried. It didn’t make sense though. If everything was locked up, then how did anyone get in and out with her in the seconds it took us to get up there?

“Turn the alarm off Matt.” I said frustrated I couldn’t think straight with it blaring at me. He nodded and jogged off to the entrance to type in the code.

“Kyle! We need to call the cops!” Cole yelled louder. Finally the alarm cut out and there was silence. I pulled my cell from my shorts ready to call Kade for the cavalry, but stopped when I realised it wasn’t silent. There was a very quiet shuffling somewhere to my right. I stopped unlocking my phone and just listened hard.

“Fuck this! I’ll call Kade!” Cole barked angrily.

“Ssh!” I said hurriedly. I listened harder and moved toward the sound. Cole followed me closely as I walked into the dining room. I found another patch of blood on the floor near the table and ducked down to follow the trail. Then I saw her and it broke my fucking heart. She was at the other end of the table, curled up tight and rocking, her hands over her ears and blood on the floor before her, likely coming from her foot.

“Get the first aid kit.” I told Cole as I stood and forced myself to take a breath.

“What? Why?” He asked, then he ducked down to look and gasped. “Fuck!”

“She’ll be ok, but we need to stop that bleeding. Get the first aid kit and warn Matt. I’m going to try and talk to her,”

“Should I call Xander?” Cole asked.

“Not yet. He’s working and I think we can handle this.” Cole nodded, then headed off to do as I asked. I took another deep breath, then dropped to my hands and knees and crawled under the table until I was only a foot away from her. She was rocking back and forth maniacally, the shuffling sound made by her sweater on the tiles. Her foot was bleeding quite badly and there were red spots on her skin, where I assumed hot tea had splashed her.

“Olivia? Can you hear me Princess?” I asked softly. She didn’t respond, but her rocking stuttered and then stopped completely. “That’s good, baby. Think you can open those beautiful eyes and look at me now?” I coaxed.

“Kyle?” She whispered, her voice shaky and raw.

“Yes Princess. I’m here. You’re safe. I’m not going to let anyone hurt you.” Slowly she opened her eyes and dropped her hands from her ears. There were red marks on the side of her face where she had been pressing her hands so tightly. She looked up and her eyes met mine. She was terrified, completely terrified and I wished there was some way I could

click my fingers and take away every awful thing she had been through to put that fear there.

“Hey.” I whispered as I forced a smile in an attempt to comfort her.

“Kyle!” She cried my name like it was her only lifeline, and before I could react she had launched her quaking body forward. I just caught her before she smashed into my chest hard and hurt herself. She grabbed handfuls of my sweaty t-shirt and held on for her life. She was like a pneumatic drill in my arms, shaking violently and freezing cold.

“I’ve got you now. You’re ok.” I whispered as I pulled her tight against me and held her as I knew she needed. She was crying and just seemed so lost.

“Kyle?” I looked across and found Matt crouched at the other end of the table, looking terrified.

“Grab me a blanket Matt. She’s freezing.” I asked and he nodded and hurried away, returning a moment later with a blanket from the stack in the lounge. He tossed it over and I struggled to wrap it around her with one hand, not wanting to release her with the other.

Once I had her tightly wrapped I held her tight and whispered over and over again that she was safe at home, with Matt, Cole and I, that we would never let anything happen to her. It took around ten minutes, but slowly, very slowly she started to come back to us. First the sobs stopped, then she released the unrelenting grip she had on my shirt. Then the shaking eased a little until finally those dark sapphire eyes were looking up at me with confusion and fear.

“Kyle? Did I freak out again?” She asked, her voice weak and croaky.

“A little bit. Are you with me now?” I asked.

“I’m not sure.” She replied hazily.

“The security alarm went off and I think it must have scared you.”

“Security alarm?”

“Mom and Dad set it when they leave. There’s nothing to worry about. We checked the house. It’s secure. You’re safe.”

“Did I hide here?” She asked as she looked around her.

“I guess so.”

“Oh God!” She groaned. “I’m so s-sorry Kyle.”

“Hey! No apologies. None of this is your fault. It’s PTSD and it’s to be expected after what you’ve been through. It’s ok to freak out as long as you come back to me afterwards, ok?”

“Ok.” She agreed exhaustedly.

“You gonna be alright if I pick you up and get us out of here?” I asked.

“I’m ok. I can walk.”

“No, you’re bleeding. There could be glass in your foot.” I warned and she looked down to where blood ran from her foot and down my leg where it rested.

“Oh crap! I’m so sorry Ky.” She gasped. I couldn’t help the brief thought that my name shortened, sounded great in her raspy voice.

“Let’s get you out of here and fixed up.” I said as I gathered her up and held her to my chest tight. I shuffled out and got to my feet as soon as I could.

Cole and Matt stood side by side right beside the table, looking pale and frantic.

“I’m so sorry you guys.” Olivia said the second she saw them both.

“All we care about is that you are good *Carina*.” Matt told her, but it was obvious what had happened had scared him badly. Hell, it had scared me too, but I had experience of handling my shit when things got bad.

“I got the first aid kit and some hot water. It’s in the lounge.” Cole told me. He seemed marginally calmer, but still refused

to take his eyes from Olivia, as though he feared she'd disappear if he did.

“Good. Let's get this foot cleaned up and checked over.” I walked through to the lounge and gently set her down on the sofa. Cole had laid towels out over the rug and had everything I needed laid out on the table beside where I knelt.

“Matt. I'm ok, really.” Olivia said, and I looked up to see him looking terrible as he saw her bleeding. He was even paler, almost grey.

“Maybe go grab her some water Matt. She'll need the fluids.” I said, giving him an opportunity to take a minute to get it together. He nodded and hurried away, stumbling over his own feet as he went.

“Cole, you should go with him, make sure he's ok. I've upset him.” Olivia whimpered, tearful once again.

“He'll be fine, beautiful. Don't get upset.” Cole reassured her, then he turned and followed Matt into the kitchen.

Not knowing what to say to comfort her I set to work on her foot instead. She had stood on a large piece of the cup and it was deeply embedded, hence all of the bleeding. The small burns on the top of her foot were also blistering and I knew I was out of my depth.

“This is bad Liv. I need to call Xander.” I sighed as I placed her foot gently on top of a folded towel to cushion it.

“You don't need to do that. He's busy.” She cried. “I'm fine Kyle. It barely even hurts.”

“There is a large piece of smashed pottery in there, making it bleed like crazy and you have a ton of small burns from the boiling tea. If it isn't handled properly you could end up with a nasty infection.”

“Trust me Kyle. If I didn't die before, this is not going to kill me now. Just rip it out. I can handle it.” She said firmly.

“Well the difference is you have all of us now. We're not taking the risk. Try and sit still until Xander gets here, ok?”

She nodded with a pout. I knew she was worried about Matt and how much she had scared all of us and hated the idea of worrying Xander with it too, but there was no way I was letting her suffer with botched first aid when our brother was a doctor who could fix her up properly.

Xander wasn't answering his cell, so I called the switchboard and waited for the nurses to track him down.

"Dr King." He answered after a few minutes.

"Xand, it's Kyle. You busy man?"

"No. I just got out of a meeting. Why? What's wrong?"

"Liv got hurt and it's beyond my limited first aid."

"What the fuck do you mean Liv got hurt?" He growled.

"The security alarm went off and scared the shit out of her. She dropped a cup of tea and cut her foot running to hide. It's deep and she had some small burns too."

"Fuck Kyle!"

"I know Xander, ok? We all feel like shit about it, but it happened and we just have to do what we can to fix her up now."

"I'll be there in twenty minutes. Raise her foot to try and stem the bleeding and keep her hydrated."

"I will." I agreed, then hung up.

I was so pissed with myself for not only letting what had happened, happen, but also for what else could have happened. We left her completely alone. What we had first feared, that some crazy had broken in and taken her, had been very possible. I would never take risks like that with her again, especially not until the monster who had hurt her was behind iron bars or cold in the ground. We had all agreed to keep her safe and protected and just three days in, she was bleeding and hurt. We needed to do a hell of a lot better.

OLIVIA

Kyle had me laid on the sofa, pretty much immobile, my foot raised high on a towel covered mountain of cushions. I felt so stupid for the way I had reacted to an alarm, I had now remembered, I triggered. Cole and Kyle had been worried and Matt looked ill over the whole situation. I hated that I caused him pain and I hated that Xander was also now rushing to me, worried unnecessarily. I seriously needed to do something to deal with these 'episodes'. What if Evie had been home and seen what happened? I'd have scared her stupid. I couldn't let it happen.

"KYLE?" A voice boomed as the front door slammed. I was expecting it to be Xander, but quickly realised from the deep voice it wasn't.

"In here Dad." Kyle called back from where he sat on the armchair opposite me. Cole and Matt were sat too, Cole at my side, cradling my back, and Matt in the armchair to my left.

Grant hurried into the room looking dishevelled. His tie had been pulled loose to the side and his top button undone. His jacket was badly wrinkled and his hair was a wild mess as though he had been pulling it straight up. His eyes searched the room frantically and I thought he was looking for Matt, worried by how much I had upset him, but then his eyes landed on me and he released a long breath as he looked me over.

"Olivia! Jesus! Are you ok? What happened?" He asked as he hurried around and knelt on the floor in front of me. Was he worried about me?

"She's ok. Xander is on his way to handle the cut on her foot." Kyle explained and Grant looked to my raised foot with concern.

"You're bleeding."

"It's nothing. It was my fault. I tried to go outside and I accidentally set the alarm off. I freaked out, dropped my tea

and hid. I scared the guys really bad. I'm so sorry Grant."

"You do not apologise Olivia. All anyone cares about is that you are safe and well. Keira would be here too, but she was mid appointment. She'll be calling for an update any minute."

"Xander called you guys?" Cole asked.

"Yes he did, as you guys should have done, right away." Grant scolded.

"It took us a while to handle things and then once we did..... we weren't thinking straight."

"He means I was a Froot Loop under the table and it took him quite a while to get me out, then when he did, they were all freaked the hell out by my crazy." I explained, hoping to ease the tension in the room.

"Olivia, don't say that about yourself. You are not crazy. You had a perfectly reasonable reaction to a scary situation." Matt almost pleaded, making me feel bad again.

"He's right sweetheart. We all understand that you are going through things beyond our comprehension. We just want to be here to help you get through them. You don't need to be embarrassed. We all care deeply about you and we're here for you now, no matter what." Grant agreed, once again catching me off guard with how much he seemed to care, how much they all did.

"You're all too kind. I'm really not worth it." I whispered tearfully.

"Yes Liv, you are damn well worth it. Don't you say that about yourself again. You are a very special person and we are all so lucky to have you here." Kyle said with fire in his eyes. He meant what he was saying. I just wished I believed him, believed what he thought of me, but I knew I was no one.

Thankfully the front door crashing closed once again broke the conversation and we all looked around as Xander came hurrying in. He was in Navy scrubs, a backpack thrown over his shoulder.

“Fuck Xander! You didn’t leave some poor person open on the table did you?” Cole laughed.

“Ha! Very funny!” Xander said dryly. “That would be pretty impossible since I am not a surgeon!” He hurried around and knelt on the floor beside Grant.

“How are you sweetheart? You ok?” He asked. He was opening his bag as he spoke and pulling out packet after packet.

“I’m fine Xander. I told Kyle not to call you. It’s nothing.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.” He sighed, then he set to work, cursing and swearing up a storm as he did. He cleaned up the cut, closed it with some butterfly stitches, and dressed it with a waterproof dressing, then applied ointment to the small burns. Everything he did was overkill, since I had dealt with far, far worse injuries and burns alone in that hellhole since I was nine years old. Still, I decided it was better not to say that, since it would upset everyone. Instead I just kept quiet and let Xander do what he needed to, to make everyone feel better.

As he finished up Grant, who was still sat on the floor beside me, pulled out his vibrating cell phone.

“It’s Keira.” He said as he hit the button to pick up the call, then Keira’s voice filled the room.

“Grant? Are you home? How is she?” She asked all at once, sounding just as worried and frantic as Grant had looked when he walked in.

“I’m home. Xander’s here too, patching Olivia up.”

“How bad is it? What happened?”

“It’s not bad Keira. I just stood on some glass. I’m fine. The guys are overreacting.” I said, hating that she was so worried and upset.

“Oh Honey, I’m so glad you’re ok. I was so worried.” Her kindness and concern were completely unexpected, but it felt good. It had been so long since anyone mothered me and I hadn’t realised how much I had missed it until that moment.

“I’m going to come home now, make sure those boys are looking after you.”

“No Keira! Please don’t. This was all my fault and I feel ridiculous enough with everyone here. Please don’t disrupt your afternoon for me. I really am fine.” I was almost begging. I had already torn Grant and Xander from work and damn near given Kyle, Cole and Matt coronaries. I refused to let things escalate any further.

“Xander?” Keira said and I looked down to him pleadingly.

“Olivia’s right Mom. You don’t need to come home. The cut was deep, but I’ve taken care of it now. She’ll be fine once she gets a little rest.” He sounded exhausted and I knew it was my fault. I had scared him badly, scared all of them.

“Ok. If you’re sure you don’t need me there Olivia, then I won’t come home now.” Keira gave in and I let out a small sigh of relief. “But you boys make sure you stay close and take care of her. I’ll try and get home for dinner.”

“Don’t worry Mom. She’s not leaving our sight.” Kyle said grumpily. I looked across to him and found him watching me hard, a look of determination and fire in his eyes. I wondered what I had awoken in him?

“Ok. I should go then, but call me if you need anything. Get some rest Olivia.” I agreed and said goodbye, then Keira hung up.

I couldn’t believe the carnage I had caused that morning, all because I tripped a damn alarm. I was such a damned mess and I knew I needed to do something about it. It was time to try and make steps to get over the fears I had come away from The Darkness with. Problem was, I had no idea how to do that or where to even start.

Xander left shortly after, promising to be back the next morning after his shift, to check the wound and change the dressing. I convinced Grant to get back to work too, then I was just left with the three men I had terrorised that morning. Matt was still sitting in the corner, not talking, just watching me

way too closely. Cole was up and down like a yo-yo, grabbing me things I didn't need, then taking them away when I didn't want them. And Kyle was still looking at me with that fire in his eyes. I was desperate to know what he was thinking, but I dare not ask.

"I think I'll head up to bed for a while, if that's ok? I'm really tired." I said, needing to get away and give them some time to calm down.

"Here Brains, let me help you up." Cole said. He was already standing over me, having appeared there like a cartoon character in a blur of dust. I took his offered hand and pulled myself up with his help. My foot was painful to put weight on, but easily bearable for me.

"I'm really sorry I scared you all." I said, needing them to know I hated what had happened. I looked at Matt as I spoke and he forced a smile for me.

"Not your fault Olivia." He assured me, but I knew it was.

Cole wrapped an arm around my waist and all but lifted me off of the ground, taking all of my weight so that I felt as though I were having an outer body experience as I tried to walk.

He led me up the stairs and into my room, where I flopped down on my bed. Cole sat down beside me still dressed in his gym clothes and smelling strongly of his earlier workout.

"You ok?" He asked after a few moments of silence.

"You forgot the 'crazy' part when you told me who I was last night." I sighed, annoyed with myself more than anything.

"You are being far too hard on yourself over this Olivia. What happened was not your fault. You spent years in silence. It's no wonder loud noises scare the shit out of you. We get that. You need to too."

"How do you know.....a-about the silence?" I asked, shocked.

"Your voice, it's pretty clear it hasn't been used in years, and your nightmare this morning. You opened your mouth like you

were in pain and wanted to scream, but you didn't. You stayed silent the whole time.”

“It was one of the worst things, to be completely alone and scared.to never even hear a voice, or any sound really. That and the Darkness. I really thought I would go insane. Hey, maybe I did?” I tried for a laugh, but it came out as more of a sob, as tears escaped.

“You did not go insane. I don't know how you did it, but you survived and left that monster behind. Not only that, but you came out a warrior, stronger and braver than anyone else I have ever known.” He leant in and wiped a tear from my cheek as he spoke and the contact felt so warm and safe. I leant sideways into his body and he pulled me in tight, holding me close to him.

“I don't feel strong or brave Cole.” I admitted tearfully.

“Mainly I just feel lost a-and weak.”

“You need to cut yourself a break Brains. It hasn't even been a week since you escaped and you are doing so well. You've come here and pushed through your fears to get to know all of us. You solved a serial killer's sick letter and you have made Kyle smile more in two days, than I have seen him do in the last year.

“You were gone a long time. It's going to take a while to find your feet and a lot longer for you to find a way to deal with everything you went through. Stop trying to rush it, and please stop worrying about everyone else. We can all take care of our own shit. You just need to focus on you and try to focus on how good you are doing. A freak out here and there is nothing when you manage so well the rest of the time. Just keep going and over time, things will get easier, I know they will.”

“I just don't want to hurt anyone else, Cole. Matt, he's fragile and Kyle too. They were so scared this morning. Matt looked like he would pass out. If me being here is making what they have suffered worse, then I don't want to be here.”

“You are not going anywhere. You belong here with us.” Cole almost growled as he stared me down hard. I was surprised he cared so much. “Matt is a tough sonofabitch. Yes he was freaked this morning, but it was because he hated seeing you so scared. He wanted to do something to end it for you, like we all do.

Yes, you being here reminds him of his own demons, but he’s been happier since you came here than I have seen him in a long time. It helps him to know there is someone who has been through what he has. He feels he’s not alone when you’re here.

“And as for Kyle, I already told you, you make him happy. I saw him leaving for work yesterday with a huge fucking grin on his face. You know the last time I saw that grin on him? Over eighteen months ago.”

“He’s had a tough time, hasn’t he?” I asked, needing to know.

“Kyle had a bad childhood before he came here. It took him a while to come to terms with it and leave it where it belonged, in the past. He was good then, for a long time, happy and pretty laid back. He joined the military and he was happy with his lot, until last year. Everything went to shit for him again and he has been struggling, really struggling.

“This new job has helped him come back to reality, but he really started to come back the night he met you Olivia. You make him smile, and I think in time you could be what he needs to mend his broken pieces, maybe to mend all of our broken pieces.”

“That would be pretty impossible, since I can’t even begin to mend my own.”

“You will. You’re stronger than you know. Just cut yourself some slack in the meantime though, yeah?”

“I’ll try.” I knew he was right, I wanted to just fix everything and wake up the next day being perfectly normal, but I knew that was never going to happen. I needed to be more realistic in my goals.

“Kade has my case right? Looking for my kidnapper?” I asked. This needed to be the first step. If I was ever going to move forward, I needed to do all I could to stop history being repeated.

“Yeah, he does. Why?”

“I need to make sure that monster doesn;t come for me again, or worse, go after some poor innocent child.”

“You want to talk to Kade about what you know?”

“No. I don’t want to. I know talking about it all will bring it back, likely more than I can handle. But I....I have to, Cole. That man has to be stopped and no one knows more about him than I do.”

“You don’t have to be alone. Kade can do it here and you can have as many or as few people as you need around you. You’re not alone in any of this.”

“Would you guys sit with me?” I asked hopefully. “You, Matt and Kyle?” I didn’t know what it was about the three of them, but I felt safer and stronger with them at my side.

“Of course we will, beautiful.” Cole wrapped both of his arms around my shoulders and pulled me in for a squeeze. I relished the hold while it lasted, loving the way his heat surrounded me.

“Call Kade please. Ask him to come when he can. I want to get it over and done with.” I said once we pulled apart.

“I will. We’ll arrange it all. Why don’t you get settled in bed now and try to rest for a while. You look really tired.” Cole stood as he spoke, pulling the comforter back and directing me under. I crawled in and laughed a little when Cole tucked me in like my parents used to when I was small.

“Rest now. I’m going to my room to shower and change. I’ll call Kade, then I’ll come back and sit with you, ok?”

I watched him leave, then lay in bed mulling over everything he had said. I knew he was right, I needed to give everything a little more time. Yes I was a mess, but less so than I had been

when I escaped a week before. Maybe another week and I would be doing even better. It would take time and me being annoyed and impatient wouldn't help.

I wondered at the way being with Cole, Matt and Kyle made me feel. I just felt better when they were near, as though I could face anything with them at my side. They made me feel safe and protected. They also made me feel things I had never felt before, fluttery warm feelings I couldn't decipher. I was pretty sure I had a crush on all of them, Kade too, though I didn't know him as well yet, but was that weird? Were you supposed to crush on multiple guys? It was all just so new and confusing, and on top of everything else, far more than I could deal with.

I decided to just focus on what I could handle, helping Kade find The Shadow, and finding my place in that weird and wonderful home. It would make a good start.

CHAPTER 9

Kade was already at the house when I woke up a couple of hours later. Cole, who had been sitting with me while I slept, told me Kade wanted to be there to get it done as soon as possible.

I hurried to freshen up, not wanting to keep him waiting, my heart pounding so hard I worried it might beat out of my chest

the whole time. I had asked Kade to come as soon as possible, but now that he was there I was terrified to delve into my memories.

Once I had finished in the bathroom, I returned to my room and found Cole had left. I grabbed some thick socks and a sweater, and pulled them on feeling chilled. I wasn't sure if it was from the cold weather, or from my fear, but I was shivering.

Before I headed downstairs I opened the bottom drawer of my dresser and grabbed the sheet I had placed there the day before. I had sketched the picture hurriedly, almost maniacally, needing to get the image down as fast as possible and then out of my sight. I sobbed the whole time I drew and I hated having it in my hand. Being that close, was too close, but I had drawn it knowing it would help Kade and I needed him to have it.

“You ready, beautiful girl?” Cole appeared in my doorway. He had showered and changed earlier and as always, he looked good in Khaki chinos and a dark denim button up.

“Not really, but let's go anyway.” I sighed as I took his hand and followed him out of my room, hobbling downstairs, the picture burning a hole in my hand the whole way.

“Are you cold?” Cole asked as we reached the entrance to the lounge.

“A little. I think adrenaline is kicking in too though.” I admitted.

“You don't have to do this.” He said softly, as he looked me over closely

“I do.” I countered. “I'll be ok, as long as you guys are with me. I can do this.”

Cole nodded and we walked in. Kade stood before the huge fireplace. He was dressed in jeans, and a fitted black t-shirt that looked amazing stretched over his ample muscles. His hair was waxed neatly in place, and he looked good. The fire behind him was lit, a real log fire crackling and filling the room with the smell of long forgotten snowy winters.

Kade was the first to look up to me, his stunning amber eyes locking hard on to mine. For a second he looked to be in pain, but with a blink, that was gone and replaced with a neutral smile.

“Hey Olivia. How are you feeling?” He asked, making Matt and Kyle turn to look at me from where they sat on the sectional opposite him.

They too had changed, both looking as casually perfect as always.

“Come sit down Princess.” Kyle patted the seat between him and Matt.

I was frozen in place, fear beginning to take its hold, but Cole’s warm arm wrapping around my back was enough to give me the strength to move.

“Hey Kade,” I whispered as I passed him. My entire body was vibrating as we walked over to the sectional and I looked up to Cole with desperate panic and fear.

“You’re a warrior.” He whispered in reply as he wrapped his arms around me from the back, then turned with me tight in his arms and sat in the space, settling me down on his lap and banding his arms around my waist tight.

I was shocked for a moment, but when I felt his warmth and strength surrounding me I knew I needed it.

Kyle reached over and took my left hand tight in his and Matt placed a huge, warm hand over my right knee. They were assuring me they were there with me and it made me feel stronger.

“I....I made this. You should take it.” I said as I held the paper out to Kade, wanting it far away from me.

Kade stepped forward and took it, then opened the page and studied it hard.

“This him?” He asked.

I nodded, praying he didn't turn the page. I couldn't see that face again.

"This is a huge help Olivia, thank you." He said as he folded the page again and put it down just under his backpack on the chair in the corner.

"Cole told me you want to talk to me about what you know so I can catch the man who hurt you?" Kade asked, talking calmly and almost as though I were a child or a frightened animal.

"I....I don't want him to hurt anyone else." I replied, shocked at how raspy and quiet my voice came out.

Matt instantly handed me a cold glass of water, which I took gratefully and sipped.

"I promise you love, I am doing everything I can to make sure that doesn't happen, but anything you can tell me will make my job easier."

"Where should I start?" I asked nervously.

"That's up to you. You can tell me as much or as little as you feel able. I don't want you to push yourself too hard though. If there are things you're not ready to go back into, that's ok. I'm going to take notes so I can go over them again later, ok?" He nodded to the notebook he had laid out on the coffee table and I nodded.

"If you need to stop at any time you just tell us and we'll all take a break." He added as he sat in the armchair beside the fire, almost facing me and picked up his notebook and pen. I assumed that meant he was ready to start and I took a deep, quaking breath. Cole squeezed me around the waist, reassuring me that he was there and I put my shaking hand over his arm, needing something to cling to.

"When I started fourth grade I begged my Mom to let me walk the two blocks to school alone. Most of the other kids did already, but she and my Dad were protective. They weren't sure, but they let me eventually. I was about half way through the year I guess, so I'd walked to school a ton of times with no

trouble, but that morning, he.....he was just there, at the end of my street waiting. He g-grabbed me before I knew what was going on and threw me in the back of a van. I didn't really see much of it, but it was definitely painted a weird green colour, like avocado? It was kind of big, though I was pretty small so everything was big to me." I took a deep breath. I was talking too fast and my voice was already struggling. "It must have been big though, because after we drove for quite a long time, he climbed in the back and he stood, right up, in there.

"He pulled me out of the van and we were in like, a forest. There were trees everywhere and there was no real road, just a track.

"That was the best look I ever got of The Shadow." I gulped, remembering that moment his cold, hard eyes had stared down at me. It had been the moment I knew my life would never ever be the same again.

"The Shadow?" Kade prompted me, dragging me back into the warm lounge, away from that terrifying winter morning in the woods.

"It's what I called him. It was always dark, so I could never really see him. He was like a shadow. There was a time when I started to think maybe he wasn't even a real person.....more like a monster or demon or something" I explained with a shudder.

"Can you remember anything specific about him? Eye colour? Hair colour?" Kade asked.

"He was big, probably about six two, six three. His hair was dark, probably brown, but he was always so filthy it would be hard to know for sure. He always kept it cut the length I drew, like to his shoulders. He's receding on top, his hairline pretty far back now. His eyes....." I went back to that morning, when the sun had been shining down on him and he had looked to me like the most terrifying monster, looming over me. ".....definitely green, dark though, really dark green. He had a scar that ran from the right corner of his mouth and down to his chin. He's overweight, his stomach kind of

drooped over the top of his pants. He wears, like...hunting clothes? They were patterned, like to blend in.”

“Camo you mean? Like soldiers wear, greens and browns?” Kyle suggested.

“Yes, like soldiers. He always wore cargo pants and a shirt like that, but they were always dirty and rumpled.” Matt handed me the water again and I took a sip, then handed it back with a grateful smile.

“He dragged me into a really small cabin. It was made of wood and was just one room with a fireplace and a cot in the corner. It was more like a shed really, and it was completely in the middle of nowhere. There was a hatch in the floor and he threw me down there. I didn’t know what it was when he first put me down there. It was basically a large open space with no windows. I later realised it was one of those bunkers, like for the end of the world. Anyway, he’d cleared everything out of there. It was damp and crumbling, but secure enough to hold me for a really long time.” The last word broke as it turned into a sob and I had to take deep breaths to stop any more following.

“We can stop now if you need to, Love. I have enough to get started.” Kade said as he looked over to me with concern.

“No. I’m ok. I just want to get this done.” My voice was weak and so croaky. My throat hurt from using it too.

“Please would you make me some tea Matt?. My voice is failing me.” I whispered.

“Of course *Carina*.” He ran a finger down my cheek, then smiled before he stood and hurried away.

“Do you want to take a breather?” Kyle asked, but I knew, if I stopped, I’d scare myself into never starting again. I needed to just get it out. I shook my head, then took a deep breath.

“The bunker, I called it ‘The Darkness’, because to me that’s what it was. It was always pitch dark, except for when he came down. He’d always bring a lantern with him. He liked to see the wounds he inflicted.” I hissed. “That’s why he took

me. He was sick and twisted. He liked to know he had full control of me, hence the no noise thing. A-after the first day he took me, and beat me bloody f.....for crying for my Mom and Dad, I never uttered a word again. It took time.....to learn not make sounds when he hurt me, but over time I learned and those went too.

“He never spoke one word to me, ever. I never heard his voice. His breath always had the smell of alcohol though, and I know he lived in that tiny cabin above me. He only left once every seven days, same time every week without fail. He w-would be gone for around two hours each time. I counted the seconds each time to be sure, and I think I was pretty accurate.”

“You think he went for groceries and supplies?” Kade asked.

“He must have, though if he bought food, he never brought me anything that resembled real produce. He didn’t have clean running water. When h-he was feeling generous and brought me a one litre bottle, it was always murky and had all sorts of crap in it. I guessed he used a well or a stream for it.” Matt reappeared with a steaming mug, which he carefully handed to me.

“Green tea with honey and lemon. It should help your throat.” He said kindly.

“Thankyou.” I held the cup for a minute and let the heat from it and the men around me, remind me I was just telling the story, I wasn’t there.

“There was d-definitely something wrong with him. He acted crazy.....really crazy, and his moods were wild. Sometimes he’d be almost feral, throwing me around and attacking me like an animal. Other times he was more controlled, tying me down and playing with his knives. Those times were like.....” I swallowed hard, trying to get the words out. “.....like torture sessions, except there was nothing to tell him to make it end.” Tears were streaming and I was still shaking badly. Kyle squeezed my hand hard and I realised what I was saying was probably as hard for them to hear, as it was for me to tell.

“Then there were times when he’d be calm, and almost caring. He’d bring me antibiotics and ointments for the wounds he’d put there. Those times were the worst, because there was a motive behind his caring, and they always ended the same way.” The last words were a squeak and I knew I was close to freaking out.

“I’m sorry. I just.....I need a second.” I was already up from Coles lap and hurrying to the kitchen. I placed the tea on the counter and turned to the sliding doors. I pushed one open and slipped out closing it behind me.

I walked down to the lawn and took huge deep breaths as the wild wind blew through my escaped strands of hair. It was a dull day, the sky filled with clouds, but the cold was a welcome relief, a sign that I was outside and free. I walked up and down, the grass feeling bumpy and cold under my sock covered feet.

“You’re ok, you’re free. It’s all over.” I whispered to myself as I fought the images of him touching me trying to push their way in. I paced back and forth on the grass, taking in every sound and touch around me, assuring myself over and over again that I was safe and free.

It took a few minutes, but eventually I was able to centre myself and get a full breath in. I turned to the house and found all four of the guys watching me through the glass doors, their faces filled with worry.

I smiled, wanting to reassure them I was alright and when they all smiled back, it was overwhelming. They were just all so handsome and perfect. I knew I was very damned lucky to have them on my side.

One more deep breath and I headed inside. My teeth were chattering from the cold, but I felt stronger and able to get the rest out.

“Here crazy lady, you must be frozen.” Cole said with a smile as he approached and wrapped a fleece blanket tight around me.

“I like the cold.” I told him with a smile. He just shook his head in despair and handed me my tea. I took a sip and then looked to Kade.

“Can we just get this finished please?” I asked.

“Are you sure?” He looked from me to Kyle and when I followed his line of vision, I found Kyle looking red faced and angry. His hands hung at his sides, clenched into tight fists. Obviously what I had recounted had pissed him off, but he was trying hard to hide his anger for my sake.

“You guys don’t have to be in there if this is too much. I shouldn’t have made you listen.” I said guiltily.

“Fuck Liv!” Kyle growled. “You lived through it all. I think we can manage to be there for you while you recount it.”

I looked across to Matt and Cole, who both nodded that they agreed. Knowing it was too late to try and shelter them now, I simply nodded too, and took my tea back through to the lounge. The guys all followed close behind and Matt and Kade took the seats they had before, but when I looked to Cole, he nodded to Kyle behind me. I quickly realised he was telling me Kyle needed me close while he heard the rest, and seeing the stress on his taut face, I agreed.

Cole took the seat on the right that Kyle had before, leaving Kyle the middle seat. His ass was barely in the seat before I lowered down onto his lap without even asking him. Luckily he didn’t mind, just pulled me tight into his front and held me, one arm around my stomach and the other under my arms and across my chest.

“I will never let anyone hurt you ever again Princess.” He whispered into my ear, almost angrily and I knew he was struggling.

“I know.” I said back, needing him to know I trusted him, trusted all of them. I finished the tea and handed the mug to Matt when he reached for it.

“You ready, love?” Kade asked from where he sat. I nodded, then just started where I felt able to. I had said all I could say

about The Shadow touching me. It was too much to go into. I wasn't strong enough.

"He...he liked routine. Always left on the same day at the same time, always had set times that he c-came to me.....to hurt me. He would go to sleep at a set time and wake at a set time. He's kind of OCD too, but not with personal hygiene. There was always a certain way he organised his knives, or whatever he brought down with him.

"Time passed slowly, the days always the same, week after week. If I got sick he would leave me pills and water, and stay away until I was better. It was like he was scared of illness or disease.

"There were a couple of times when I was really sick, probably with infections from the open wounds. I thought I'd die down there alone in the dark.....maybe even hoped I would a couple of times. But I didn't.

"Years passed. I kept a count of the days, always knowing when one passed by the sounds of him above going to bed each night. It was 2928 days the last I remember, but there's a blank in my memory. I remember laying down to sleep, the last night there, and the next thing is me being in the woods, covered in blood, just running. That's when I was found."

"Do you know how long you were running for before those cops found you?"

"Not really, but it was quite a long time. I'd say it was early morning, just after dawn when I was first in the woods. By the time I was on the road, with the cops, the sun was high, so definitely quite a few hours." I reasoned.

"That's good. I can use that to try and find this cabin."

"Do you th-think you can find him Kade?" I asked, exhausted.

"I won't stop until I do. He's going to jail for what he put you through."

"Do you think he's looking for me, that he'd w.....want me back?" I had been afraid to ask, but I had to know.

“There’s a chance he will look for you, yes, but it doesn’t matter. You’re safe here, Love. We won’t let him take you again.”

“We’re all going to protect you *Carina*. You don’t need to worry.” Matt agreed.

“What.....what if you find the cabin and.....I killed him? There was blood on me, I could have. Something had to have happened to allow me to escape, but I just can’t.....I’ve tried, but I can’t remember anything.” It was a thought I had been fighting since the moment I realised I had gotten free and had no memory of how.

“After what he did to you, no one is going to question whatever you had to do to escape Liv. You do not stress yourself out with that crap. Whatever you did, you did because it was you or him.” Kyle said vehemently. I turned in his arms and buried my face in his shirt, needing a minute to recoup. I didn’t know how I felt about the possibility I had been forced to do something terrible to escape The Shadow. Of course I had been desperate to escape and I had planned ways to make that escape a hundred times or more, but I had never imagined I would actually have to kill my kidnapper. Maim him, yes, maybe I could do that, but was I really capable of taking a life, even the life of the man who had destroyed me? I wasn’t so sure.

I held onto Kyle’s shirt and curled up tight in his lap. He just held me close and let me be. His aftershave, mixed with a minty body wash, filled my senses, making me feel so grounded with him. It was just what I needed to calm my racing mind. There was nothing I could do until I remembered or Kade found that cabin. Adding stress to my already crazy head seemed foolish. Cole had been right earlier, I needed to learn to handle the things I could control first. I took a few minutes to just re-centre, then sat up and gave Kyle a shy smile, thanking him for giving me the time I needed.

“You’ve given me so much to go on there Olivia. I’m going to head into the office and start working on tracking this

scumbag right away.” Kade explained once I was back in the room.

“Did you find the other guy, the killer?” I asked.

“No, not yet, but we have everything set up to grab him tomorrow at the time and place you gave us. We’ll get him, thanks to you.”

I nodded, not sure how to reply to that. It wasn’t like I had done anything heroic. I had just thought I was doing some benile puzzle.

“I need to go and pick Evie up from school. Are you going to be ok, Brains?” Cole asked as he stood.

“I’m fine.” I agreed. “Thank you all for being here with me and for being so patient. I....I never thought I’d get through all of that, but it was so much easier with you all here.” I looked between the four of them, wanting them all to know how very much they had helped me through an almost impossible situation.

“We’re always here for you, Love, whatever you need.” Kade walked over as he spoke, and finished his words with a gentle kiss on my temple, just as he had the morning before. He was sweet and he smelt so damn good. My stomach did that weird fluttery thing and I inwardly slapped my head. Seriously, four crushes? This could not be normal. Was there something wrong with me? Did I come out of that hell hole messed up? Or maybe I had just been starved of human contact for so long, I was overcompensating and falling for every guy who was kind to me, except if that was true wouldn’t I also be crushing on Xander and Simon, maybe even Grant? I was so confused!

“What he said.” Cole whispered as he too approached and kissed my head. “I’ll be back soon.”

Kade and Cole walked out together, the front door slamming hard behind them and making me jump in Kyle’s arms.

“Easy Princess, you’re ok.” He whispered as he held me tighter.

“Sorry.” I whispered, embarrassed once again. “I’m going to stop doing that at some point soon.”

“Olivia, if I had been through what you have, I’d be rocking in a corner. It’s a miracle, and a real show of your strength that you are doing as well as you are.” Kyle told me.

“He’s right. You have been through so much more than any of us even realised. You’re amazing. I don’t know how you survived, but I’m so grateful you did, and that you came here to us.” Matt agreed.

“I’m really grateful to be here with you guys too. I would not be as ‘ok’ as I am now without you all supporting me and making me feel safe.” The words made me feel tearful, but this time the tears were happy, and hopeful for the future, as long as I had them at my side.

“We have about thirty minutes of peace before Evie descends on us with her tales of kindergarten. Do you want to take a rest for a while?” Kyle asked. I felt so warm and safe in his arms, I would have happily stayed there as long as possible, but I knew both guys were antsy, by the way they were fidgeting around. What I had told them had clearly gotten to them and I realised they needed time to re-centre too.

“If it’s ok, I’d really just like to head out to the garden for a while. I just want to get my thoughts straight after going through all of that.” It was my next best option if I couldn’t stay where I was.

“You want one of us to come with you?” Matt offered.

“No Thanks. No need. I’ll be fine. You guys do your thing for a while. I’ve been a pain in all your asses all day.” I half joked.

“You could never be a pain, Princess.” Kyle said as he leant in and kissed my temple gently. “But if you need some space that’s fine. Just stay in the yard and wrap up though, ok? It’s cold out there.”

“I will.” I agreed. Matt stood and helped me to my feet from Kyle’s lap, since when I was sitting there, my feet dangled over a foot from the floor.

As soon as I had my feet under me I launched forward and hugged Matt. He hadn't been expecting the attack style embrace, but recovered quickly and hugged me back tight.

"Thank you." I whispered, hoping he knew how very grateful I was for him being there for me.

"Always *Carina*." He whispered back. I still hadn't dared to ask him what the word meant that he used for me often, but the way he purred it with a beautiful accent behind it, gave me goosebumps every time. I loved it.

I released him before my hug became awkward, but I hated to let him go. I had never experienced anything in my life like the safety and warmth I felt in the arms of Cole, Kyle and Matt. I had a fleeting thought how it would feel and smell in Kade's arms, then mentally slapped myself for going there. I had enough going on.

Kyle walked me to the entrance and as I pulled on my boots, he pulled a thick navy puffer coat from the row of hooks on the opposite wall.

"We need to take you shopping. You need more warm clothes." He grumbled as he helped me on with what I guessed was his coat. It reached my knees and the sleeves completely covered my hands, but it was wonderfully thick and warm. Kyle fastened it up the front, then wrapped a scarf around my neck and pulled a black beanie over my head.

"Jees Kyle. I'm not sure it's that cold outside." I laughed as I fought to find my hands.

"Can't be too careful. You're still recovering. Can't have you getting sick." He straightened my hat as he spoke, then nodded as though he were satisfied I was wrapped up enough. Good job too, since there was no way any other outer clothing would fit anywhere on my body.

"Thank you." I said with a smile. I had to admit, it was nice to know how much they all cared.

"I'll just be in the kitchen if you need anything. I'll be able to hear you if you yell, ok?" I opened my mouth to ask what he

was doing in the kitchen, but then quickly realised he was likely just going in there so he could keep an eye on me. Out of all of the brothers, he seemed the most protective, and maybe if I was a normal girl, who had led a normal life, I'd have found him overbearing, but I wasn't a normal girl. I was a girl who had been alone and terrorised for a really long time. His care was what I needed to feel secure once again and I appreciated it.

"Ok." I agreed instead. I wriggled my hand free of the long sleeve and grabbed his hand, squeezing it just once to thank him again and reassure him I was doing ok for that moment. He smiled, understanding, then I let him go and headed to the kitchen and straight out of the sliding doors onto the large patio area that covered the first quarter of the yard.

Kyle had been right, it was cold, even colder than when I had been out before, but the air was crisp and the sky had cleared, allowing the sun to peek through large gaps in the clouds. It was mid November, so the trees around me were mainly bare, the dry crisp leaves that had fallen from them all, long since gone too.

I walked across the wide lawn, marvelling at the flower beds filled with bright flowers Keira had somehow managed to make grow in the bitter weather.

I took a walk around the big wooden gazebo in the centre of the garden and wondered how it would look in the summertime, the furniture all uncovered and Evie running around squealing as Grant chased her around. I wondered if the guys liked to be outside? I closed my eyes and smiled as I imagined it. I could see Kade sitting at one of the tables on the patio working away on a file, some case he couldn't stop working on, even though it was his day off. Matt would be cooking, stood at the barbeque, grilling steaks, a beer in his hand and that lazy half smile on his face. I could hear Cole and Kyle yelling to each other as they horsed around with a football, while Kiera yelled at them for crushing her flowers. Xander and Simon would arrive late, having both been working. They'd come strutting in as they did, dressed

casually for our lazy afternoon in the garden, but still impeccable, in pressed shirts and tailored shorts. I laughed as I thought of Simon in some ridiculous boat shoes or something like that. Then I surprised myself when I appeared there too, dressed in a pretty summer dress like the ones my Mom wore when I was young, sat out on a blanket in the grass, watching all of the guys around me, and laughing at Cole and Kyle's antics. I looked so happy, so full of life.

My eyes snapped open and I looked around the garden hurriedly for every one, but of course no one but me was there.

I walked over to the huge swing set and sat on one of the swings, smiling to myself as I realised how very much I wanted to see that beautiful summer scenario, become a reality and how much I needed to be there, a part of it all.

When Xander told me my parents were gone I had thought I would never get to feel a part of anything like our family had been, ever again, but I had only been in that home a matter of days and I had been made to feel I belonged. I knew I would never replace my parents. They had been everything to me when I was taken, and I knew I would never ever get over losing them, but they were gone and I needed to try and carry on. I knew that would be what they would have wanted me to do.

Keira and Grant were good people and their kids all made me happy in a way I never thought I could be again. I was settling there, feeling a part of the family and discovering who I was all over again with them all at my side. Yes I was a mess, and I knew I was likely more trouble than I was worth, but they didn't seem to mind. They understood and had been so kind and patient with me. There was hope, I realised, hope I could find my way out of The Darkness and into the light, hope that I wouldn't have to be alone again, just as Xander had promised me that day he gave me the devastating news. I had the home I needed to heal, and I was surrounded by good people there to help me do so. It was just up to me to pull things together and take the steps I needed to take to get there. Like Cole had said, I just needed to take them one at a time

and accept it wouldn't happen overnight. Maybe then I could truly find my new beginning.

CHAPTER 10

Keira and Grant were home in time for dinner that night. Matt had been in the kitchen cooking for the last hour. He had been quiet since that afternoon, but he seemed better than he had been. I just hoped his hearing all of my twisted story didn't bring his own issues back too badly.

Evie had come straight out to the garden for me the second Cole brought her home. She had several stories to tell me

about her day, then she had wanted me to help her colour in her princess book. Cole had roped himself in to help me with the unrelenting questions Evie asked, and so we were all three sitting in the lounge, colouring around the coffee table. Cole, being the laid back, good sport that he was, was wearing a pink sparkly tiara and happily discussing the best Disney princesses with Evie as I quietly coloured beside them. I glanced up and found Kyle still sitting there in an armchair, as he had been for the last thirty minutes, supposedly reading over a file for a case he was working, but every time I looked up to him, he was watching me. He had barely left my sight, or me his, anyway, since that afternoon. It was as though he dared not let me leave his sight and I wondered if the events of the day had triggered some bad memories of whatever he had been through a year before. I didn't really know what had happened to him, but I knew it had resulted in him ending his military service. I wondered if he had lost someone he cared for. It would certainly explain why he had been so affected by what had happened with the alarm that morning and why he was sticking so close to me.

"You ok, Princess?" Kyle asked, snapping me from my thoughts. I realised I had been staring at him the whole time I was lost in thought.

"Sorry, I zoned out." I said as I gave myself a shake. "I'm fine. Are you?" I looked up to him with wide eyes, trying to tell him I knew he wasn't, but he just smiled.

"All good." Was his flippant reply, and I wished he would talk to me as I felt able to talk to him. "Me and the guys were talking earlier. We want to take you shopping tomorrow if you feel up to it?" I knew he was changing the subject, but I let him away with it, for now.

"Shopping for what?" I asked.

"You need a coat and some winter shit. You can't keep going out in t-shirts."

"I have sweaters and boots. I'm fine. I don't need anything else." I countered. They had already bought me so much.

“He’s right, Brains. It will be snowing soon. You need more clothes and definitely a winter coat. Dad already got you a credit card to get whatever you need.” Cole agreed.

“A credit card?” I asked with shock.

“We all have them until we start a real job. There are no rules as long as the monthly limit isn’t exceeded.” Cole explained as though it made perfect sense.

“It just makes things easier for Mom and Dad. You don’t need to bother them if you need shit and it means you always have options to get home or whatever. It’s safer that way too.” Kyle added.

“Well that does make sense for you guys, but I’m not their kid and I have already cost them way too much. I don’t need anything. I’m fine.”

“You are part of this family now Olivia. We may not be your parents, but we care for you in that same way and we will take care of you as such.” Kiera’s voice came from behind me and I turned and found her leant on the back of the sectional, her eyes locked on me as she spoke. “We couldn’t possibly hope to replace your own parents, but I hope one day you will come to consider Grant and I as your adopted parents, just like the guys have. We care for you very much Honey.” Her eyes were filled with such kindness and sincerity, making me feel like crap for what I said.

“I didn’t mean....” I began, but she stopped me with a hand.

“I know Olivia. Just please, let us take care of you as you deserve. Go with the guys tomorrow and get whatever you want or need. We just want to do all we can to make this your home.” She was practically begging and I felt unable to argue. I’d just be disappointing her if I did.

“You already have.” I told her meaningfully. “But I’ll go shopping tomorrow too. Thankyou Kiera.”

She smiled widely as she nodded, then turned and left.

“Can I come shopping too?” Evie asked excitedly, giving me the second I needed to gather myself.

“No Half pint. You have school. We’ll take you shopping with us some other time, ok?” Cole answered.

“But you guys have school too!” Evie pouted.

“Not anymore. Matt and I aren’t going to school anymore. We get to stay home with Olivia and study, instead.”

“I want to stay home to study too! I’m asking Mommy!” She declared as she jumped to her feet. I could hear her bare feet slapping on the tile as she stomped hard to the kitchen.

“MOMMY!” She shrieked, making me slam my hands over my ears and close my eyes in fear for a moment. Her high pitch just reminded me so much of my screams that first night, I found them hard to process as the sounds of a tantruming, or laughing five year old, instead of my own agony induced screams, for my parents as I was beaten mercilessly.

I felt the heat of someone close and forced myself to open my eyes, chanting over and over in my head that I was fine, I was safe.

Cole was before me on his knees, about a foot away from me. His hands were held out in front of him like he wanted to touch me, but didn’t know if he should. I looked up to his face and saw the concern in those dark eyes.

“I’m ok.” I whispered as I slowly removed my hands and listened around me. Everything was back to a quiet buzz, the sounds of a cartoon quietly playing on the TV behind me, and Matt and Keira chatting away with Evie in the kitchen.

“Sure?” Cole asked quietly. I looked behind him and found Kyle still in the armchair, but his file had been abandoned to his lap and he was sitting right forward on the edge, as though holding himself back from dropping to the floor before me like Cole was.

“Yeah.” I nodded as I took a breath. “I don’t know how she makes her voice that loud.” I tried to laugh, but it fell flat.

“Maybe we need to sit her down, talk to her about being quieter.” Cole mused.

“Don’t you dare. She’s five. It’s her prerogative to squeal and make a ton of noise. I’ll get used to it. It’s already easier than it was a few days ago.”

“I didn’t mean for you, Brains. I just almost lost a damn eardrum.” Cole laughed and I appreciated him taking the focus from me. I was so sick of being the crazy person.

“Dinner guys!” Matt said from the doorway.

Cole took my hand and pulled me from the floor to my feet.

“You guys go ahead. I just need the bathroom.” I told him and Kyle as I straightened up my sweater. Kyle caught my eye and studied me with worry, but I just smiled that I was fine and he nodded once, then followed Cole out.

I left the lounge and crossed the hall heading for the bathroom beside the gym. I didn’t want to pass everyone until I had a second to compose myself.

I locked the door closed and leant my forehead against it. In my head all I could hear were my echoing screams and pleading cries over and over again.

“I WANT TO GO HOME!” My small fists pounded against the heavy metal door at the top of the stairs as I screamed with everything I had. I had been dumped down there hours ago and I was terrified. The ground was cold and wet and I could hear things scuttling around down there with me. I had tried to find a dry place to just sit and be good, hoping he would take me home if I was, but bugs had touched me and I’d been so terrified. Now I was back to desperate begging.

My body was trembling from the cold and the fear, my hands sore and bruised from beating my fists on that door. My pretty dress I had dressed in for school that morning felt wet and dirty, but I couldn;t see it. I couldn’t see anything and I hated the dark. At night I always slept with a nightlight. There in that damp room, there was no light at all, not a sliver.

“I WANT MY MOM AND DAD!” I wailed, my throat raw from hours of screaming and crying already.

Then the door was opening and I was sure I had won. He would take me home now. I was too much trouble, he didn't want me there. I'd get to go home and hug my Mom and Dad. I'd never complain about my Mom walking me to school again. She'd be happy about that.

Light came in as the door opened, blinding me as my eyes adjusted, but before I opened them again a hand touched my chest and shoved hard. I had no chance of pushing against it, it was too strong. I lost my footing and went tumbling down the hard steps, my small body smashing hard against the edges, screaming the whole way down until I landed in a battered heap at the bottom. I lay there, frozen, nursing my right wrist which was throbbing like my heart did, and hurting so bad.

Heavy footsteps came down slowly behind me and I turned and saw him coming, a small lantern in his hand, casting some light around the cold damp space.

“Why did you do that?” I whimpered as tears streamed down my face. He held a finger over his lips, telling me to be quiet, but I was so scared and confused.

“Please, I just want my Mom and Dad, please?” I cried. That was the first kick, hard to my right thigh. I moved across the floor with the force of the impact, until I hit a wall hard. Agony stole my breath at first and once I caught it, I cried out in pain. The Shadow, as I would later come to call him, loomed over me again, his finger before his lips. I didn't understand why he was hurting me, what I had done?

“I'm sorry.” I whispered, sure there must be something I had done wrong for him to hurt me as he was.

The next kick was to my other leg, and this time I screamed as a bone somewhere near my knee crunched.

It went on and on, me begging and screaming, crying out for it to stop, for my Mom and Dad, and him just tearing me to

pieces, each time with his damned finger in front of his lips. By the time I realised I needed to be silent I was destroyed, my pretty dress and the floor around me sprayed with my blood, snot and buckets of tears. I was sure I would die that night, and many more like it, but I never did. I always survived, even when I didn't want to.

A gentle knock on the door my forehead still leant against, had me leaping back with a startled squeak. I looked around hurriedly trying to remember where I was.

“Livy? You ok, Love? Kyle asked me to check on you, said you've been a while.” Kade's voice came through the door.

“J-Just a minute.” I replied. I wanted to sound fine, but even I heard the wobble in my voice.

“Olivia? What's wrong?” He asked gently.

“I'm ok. I...I just need a minute.” I moved to the vanity and leant down over the sink, my hands braced on either side. I needed to pull myself out of that awful night and back to the present, the safe, comfortable present.

“Take whatever time you need. I'm going to be right here though if you need me.” I heard scuffling against the door and realised he had sat down with his back to it.

I dropped down to the floor too, crawling over to where I knew he was. I laid on the floor and searched the tiny gap beneath the door for Kade. I could see where his butt was blocking the light and knew he was there. I tried to take comfort from that and use it to push back the onslaught of horrifying memories I had unleashed on my brain the moment I heard Evie shriek.

Kade didn't speak, didn't question me about what the heck I was doing. He just sat there, and I sat staring at the absence of light he was making as I fought a battle with my own brain to push back the past.

Finally I managed to get to the point where I was in the present more than the past. Feeling safer I forced myself to

stand and move to the sink, where I splashed my face with cold water.

Wanting to stay hidden all night, but also knowing the guys would never let that happen, I opened the door and watched as Kade leapt to his feet from where he had been sat, and turned to look at me. He was dressed as he had been earlier, but he still had his leather jacket on this time. He looked really good in it, all square shoulders and slim waist. His wild dark hair was pushed back from his face as though he had been anxiously running his hands through the wild strands over and over.

He looked me over in a second, then without saying a word he opened his arms and I stepped into the embrace eagerly. His heavy arms encircled me completely and I was pressed against a solid wall of hard, tightly packed muscle. I breathed in and took a second to appreciate the faint smell of spicy aftershave and real leather. Of all of the guys, Kade was the most masculine. Everything about him screamed tough guy, even his smell. He was a little shorter than Cole, but not much, maybe an inch or two smaller, but he made up for it in braun. I wondered how much he worked out to be so ripped with muscle.

“You’re home?” I whispered after a while, remembering he had been at work.

“I wanted to come and check in on you after this afternoon. I’m just here for dinner then I’ll have to go again, but I had to make sure you were doing ok.”

“Well, good job you didn’t walk in on me mid break down then.” I laughed. “Oh, wait a minute....”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself.” Kade scolded as he squeezed me tighter, showing no signs of releasing me, not that I wanted him to. “Want to talk about it?”

“Not really. I’m being stupid. Evie shouted earlier and I lost my shit. That’s all. I n-need to learn not to do that.” I said with a shrug.

“That’s not stupid. After what you went through you can’t expect things like that to just magically stop affecting you. What you need to learn not to do, is hide. We’re all here for you. If you’re struggling, grab one of us and let us help you through it. It would make it easier for you if you aren’t alone and easier for us to know you’re not alone and upset.” He suggested, the whole time still holding me.

“I’m already causing you guys enough hassle.” I sighed.

“We all care about you Olivia. We want to be here for you. You are not and never could be, a hassle. Please, Love, just believe we want you to turn to us.” He almost begged.

“Isn’t that an English thing.....’Love’, I mean?” I asked randomly. It had been my first thought when he called me that, days ago and I wanted to know.

“Yep. My mum was English, from London actually. She used to call me ‘Love’ all of the time growing up. I haven’t used it since she died a long time ago, but it just started coming out when I met you.”

“I’m sorry about your mom.” I whispered, though what he said made sense. He did say some words slightly differently than I was used to. He’d obviously picked up, and retained some of his Mom’s accent.

“It was a long time ago. Come on, we should get some food before Cole clears the lot.” He looked down to me questioningly and I knew if I said I was too tired or some other excuse he’d accept it, but I didn’t because he was only there for dinner and I wanted to be near him, to get to know him, so instead I nodded and took his offered hand.

Kyle was up on his feet as we walked into the dining room. He was moving with purpose out of the room, but stopped when he saw us and studied me hard.

“You ok?” He asked quietly and I realised he had been coming to look for me.

“I am now.” I replied, not wanting to lie to him. He nodded once, then returned to his seat beside Keira. Everyone was

seated, filling their plates from huge platters of food in the centre of the table. It smelled amazing, spicy and mouthwatering.

Kade pulled a seat out for me beside Cole and I took it gratefully, then watched and was relieved when he sat next to me.

“I made you some chicken without the chilli *Carina*.” Matt said as he pointed to a smaller plate of what looked like an amazing chicken casserole.

“Thank you. It looks delicious.” I reached for the spoon and took a large serving for me from the bowl. Kade had a big bowl of rice and he placed a portion on my plate too.

“You need to eat more.” He whispered as he did it and I didn’t disagree, so didn’t argue.

“How’s your foot feeling Honey?” Keira asked as she looked across at me.

“It’s fine. I forgot about it to be honest.” And I had. It was like I had thought earlier, a small injury like that was nothing to me after what I had endured.

“Xander said you could take more painkillers by now if you need to.” Kyle offered. I looked up to him with a smile and shook my head.

“Really, I’m fine. It doesn’t hurt, but thanks.”

“Kade told us what you did this afternoon Olivia. It was really brave of you, and we are so proud of you.” Grant said as both he and Keira looked to me with a mix of worry and relief.

“I couldn’t have done it without the guys.” I replied shyly, not used to, or sure how to accept their praise. It had been so long since anyone cared about anything I did.

“What’d she do?” Evie asked, her mouth filled with food as she spoke.

“Olivia told Kade some very hard to talk about information, to help him catch a bad man. She was super brave.” Keira

explained.

“About the man who hurt you?” Evie asked, shocking me. I looked at her with my mouth wide open, not knowing what to say. I hadn’t told her anyone had hurt me, I knew I didn’t.

“She’s got those lines on her back like Matt. I saw them last night while she was sleeping. A bad man hurt Matt, I heard Cole and him talking ‘bout it, and Livia has the same.” She explained with a shrug, then carried on eating.

“Evie, for a start you should not be listening to your brother’s private conversations.” Keira said, slightly raising her voice. “And you should definitely not be sneaking in to spy on Olivia while she’s sleeping. She would have been very startled if she woke and found you stood there, wouldn’t she?”

I looked across to Matt who was concentrating way too hard on his food. He had scars on his back too? I wondered if Evie meant the knife lines or the lines from the belt? Maybe both? I wondered again what had happened to Matt. I wanted to ask him, to know if he really had been through something similar to me, but I wouldn’t risk upsetting him.

“Sorry Livia. I won’t come into your room again without knocking, ok?” Evie said, snapping my attention back to her.

“It’s ok sweetie, but thank you for apologising.” I said as I forced a smile for her. She nodded and happily went back to eating her meal.

Keira caught my eye and I knew she was worried Evie had upset me, so I smiled for her too and went back to moving food around my plate. I had eaten a little, and it was really good, but there was no way I could fit any more in.

After dinner everyone went to the media room to watch a movie together. Kade left, promising if they caught the killer the next day in the trap they had set up for 10.02 AM, the time listed on the letter I deciphered, he would try to meet the rest of us for a late lunch while we were out shopping.

I walked him to the door and briefly hugged him before he left, then he was gone, the door closed and locked behind him.

I stood for a moment, trying to process how lost I felt without him. I knew it was stupid, I barely knew him, but it had been so good to have the four of them together, so right. Now he was gone, it was like a piece was missing.

Needing comfort and not wanting Kyle to come looking for me, I took a deep breath and headed toward the media room. I snuggled on the sofa in a space between Matt and Cole and got comfortable to watch the movie, the whole time completely confused, but also wonderfully happy about the way I felt when the guys were near.

This was such a stupid idea. We were in a mall, a huge freaking mall, crammed full with people and noise and bright lights. We'd been there ten minutes and I was a shaking mess, feeling way too hot and badly nauseous.

I was just so scared. The people surrounding me on all sides were more than I could handle, all of the noise and talking and laughing. Music was being pumped in above me and mixed with the music from the stores it was too much and way too loud.

My head snapped around to check the large group behind me for *his* face. I felt so sure he would be there somewhere, ready to grab me. It would be so easy for him in this chaos too. I wouldn't go back, I wouldn't!

"Hey, you ok?" I looked up to my right hand side where Cole stood and realised I was digging my hands into the flesh of his hand which I was holding like my only lifeline. Matt was on my left and Kyle was in front, shoving people out of the way for me to get through.

"Fine." I agreed with much too vehement of a nod as I made myself release him a little.

"I got you Beautiful. You're safe." He whispered right into my ear as he pulled me tight into his side and wrapped his arm securely over my shoulders.

I nodded once and smiled shyly, suddenly very hot with all of his attention on me.

We went into several big outfitters and I was talked into buying a long grey puffer coat with a huge padded collar that would zip right up, covering me from knees to chin. I also got gloves and a black beanie much like Kyle's, which I had been borrowing, and loved.

Kyle insisted I get a pair of watertight boots for when it snowed and I bought more jeans and sweaters too. It was way more than I needed, but it had been nice to pick things I wanted. Even before I was taken, we had never had enough money to just buy whatever we wanted. Every purchase had always been carefully planned and usually came from the sale rails.

As we left another clothes store, all three guys loaded with bags they would not let me help carry, I looked into the busy walkway with trepidation. I was getting better with being there, but I still expected The Shadow to be lurking in wait for me at every turn.

"That was Kade. He'll be here in thirty for lunch." Kyle said as he pocketed his cell and walked over to where we all waited for him.

"Did they catch him?" I asked eagerly, hoping the killer had been stopped that morning.

"He didn't say." Kyle shrugged. I nodded, then turned to check behind me when I heard a deep voice too close. By the time I whipped my head around Cole was behind me, a human shield from the rest of the world and I smiled up at him gratefully.

"We should head to the food court and grab a table." Matt suggested, but I wasn't listening. When I had looked back to Cole, the store next door had caught my eye and I was transfixed. I started to wander over, the guys all following behind me.

I stopped before the window and just stared at the beautiful baby grand piano displayed before me. It had been so long

since I saw one and I instantly felt the need to touch the keys.

“You play Princess?” Kyle asked as he walked up beside me and looked too.

“I used to. My Dad was a music teacher and he had me banging the keys before I could walk.” I explained, unable to take my eyes from the instrument before me. All I could see was my Dad, at the piano much like that one, which used to sit in the corner of our lounge. He was always at his happiest when he sat at that thing, and I was coming to understand why, since by the age of nine the piano was my happy place too.

“Let’s go in.” Cole said, and before I knew it he grabbed my hand and dragged me into the large music shop. It was filled with instruments of all types, and racks filled with sheet music.

“Hi. You guys looking for anything in particular?” A young guy asked as he approached. He wore jeans and a t-shirt with the store’s logo on the pocket.

“We’re thinking about a piano. Olivia here plays.” Cole explained as he pointed down to me and the guy’s eyes lit up. I blushed furiously as I realised he thought he was getting a huge sale out of us. We were not buying a piano though.

“This way.” The guy said as he led us excitedly through the shop and to the back corner where he had six models on display, including a ten thousand dollar grand piano. I looked around in awe and excitement as the salesman started trying with everything he had to sell us something.

“Could we just get some time to have a look around?” Kyle snapped after a few minutes, obviously bored with the overzealous assistant.

“Oh sure. Try them out. They’re all tuned. I’ll be out front when you’re ready.” And with that the assistant scurried off, probably alarmed by Kyle’s growling.

“You guys made him think we’re buying one!” I hissed as soon as he was gone.

“We might.” Matt said with a smile and I assumed he was joking.

“Will you play one for us Princess?” Kyle asked.

“I don’t know. It’s been so long I probably forgot, a-and I wasn’t exactly good anyway. I was only nine.” I explained, but I was desperate to sit and feel the cool keys beneath my fingers. Before the guys even tried to push me further I was moving to the small baby grand that reminded me most of my Dads. It was all black gloss, so shiny and inviting.

Before I could process I was sat on the stool, lifting the keylid. I put my hands on the keys and felt this rush of familiarity that had been so lacking. I pressed a few notes, just getting a feel and trying to settle back into that place I used to disappear into when I played the complicated pieces of music my father had taught me.

The piece that I started to play had always been one of my favourites, and one of the first full pieces I learnt. ‘To a Wild Rose’ reminded me of long summer days, and of wonderful, happy times. The notes just came to me as if I had never been away from my Dad’s piano. I played it all of the way through, not a note forgotten. The movements of my fingers were automatic and smooth, and the feeling of contentment overtook me completely as I became swept up in the slow, happy tune.

When I was finished I was breathing heavily, as though I’d done a work out and I felt overcome with emotion. It was the closest I had felt to my Dad since the day I left him and I missed him so damned much.

“That was awesome Brains. You’re brilliant!” Cole declared. I looked up to him with a watery smile and a second later found myself engulfed in his arms.

“Why did it make you cry?” He asked, as though he’d slay the piano if he found out it had upset me in any way.

“It just made me think of my Dad. I miss him, that’s all.” I whimpered as I fought to hold back more tears.

“He must have been very talented if he taught you to play like that by the time you were nine years old.” Kyle said from somewhere behind me. I felt his warm hand on my back, rubbing soothing circles.

I nodded, too emotional to go into just how amazing my dad had been,

“Come on. Let’s go find Kade and get some food.” Matt suggested. I nodded again and happily tucked myself against Cole as we left the shop before the assistant could accost us further.

It was less terrifying to move through that crowded place when I was holding onto Cole and wrapped under his arm. People dove out of his way, clearly intimidated by his huge six and half foot height and heavily muscled frame. To me it was all quite amusing really, since Cole was far from the scariest of the guys. He was actually the most easy going and light hearted, a real teddy bear if you knew him. Still, I felt safe with him at my side.

Kade was standing, looking sexy as hell, leant against the wall at the entrance to the food court, one foot propped up behind him on the wall, and his arms crossed over his broad chest. He was in jeans and his leather jacket, as always, but this time he had a black button down underneath and it suited him perfectly, just the right mix of sexy and dangerous.

As soon as we neared him I jumped forward and was instantly accepted into his arms. I hadn’t seen him since the night before and I had missed him. I had also been worried sick about him dealing with the serial killer that morning, and was so relieved to find him in one piece.

“Miss me, Love?” He asked in his deep rumble, a laugh behind his words.

“Yes, I did.” I replied honestly. “Are you ok? Did he show up?”

“I’m fine, but he never showed. We think something spooked him. Maybe he saw one of our guys staking the place out or

something.” He explained with a shrug. I stepped back and looked up at him.

“Was it me? Was my math wrong?” I asked nervously. If someone died because I got the date, time and place wrong I wasn’t sure I’d be able to handle it.

“No love. Your math was spot on. You worked out the time and GPS coordinates of the first two without knowing about either of them. You were right. It was us that screwed this up somehow. We’ll fix it. Don’t worry.”

“Come on. Let’s find a table. Livy’s worn out.” Kyle beckoned, as he started towards a crowded seating area. All of the tables were packed and the conversations around us seemed deafening. I stopped moving, not able to go any further into the chaos. Kade stepped into me and grabbed my shoulders to steady me as he got his feet under him.

“What’s wrong?” He asked close to my ear.

“I can’t. I’m sorry. It’s too much.....too loud.” I admitted, embarrassed. He nodded and pulled me around so my face was hidden against his chest. He covered my ears, then made a high whistle. When I looked up confused, all of the guys had heard him and were hurrying back toward us.

“We’re going to Ricci’s instead. It’s too crowded and noisy in here for Livy.” He told them when they surrounded us, and no one said a word in argument.

Tucked tight against Kade, I followed them all down some stairs and out of the mall. We walked two blocks over to a strip of small bars and restaurants and Kade led me into a tiny little Italian bistro called ‘Ricci’s’.

Inside it was quiet, with very low background music and just a couple of small tables occupied. The restaurant was small, but bright and spaced well, so it didn’t feel crowded.

“This ok, Love?” Kade asked me quietly as I stood in the entrance taking it all in.

I nodded and smiled, making him smile too. He looked so handsome when he smiled, and so much less dangerous, not that dangerous Kade wasn't handsome too.

A waitress greeted us, and I didn't miss the way she checked out everyone of my guys. *My guys? The guys, I meant the guys!*

As she led us to a large booth in the back I saw the way she pushed her chest out and swung her hips with extra sway. Who could blame her? They were all beautiful and she was definitely an attractive girl, around my age with curly blonde hair and wide ice grey eyes.

We all sat, me wedged at the back between Kade and Kyle and Cole and Matt on the two ends.

As we ordered drinks she kept on flicking those fluttering eyes back to me, studying me hard. I wondered if she was mad I was with the guys, and by the time I needed to tell her my order I was too nervous about her staring to get a choice out. I looked across to Matt pleadingly, knowing as always, he would understand I was struggling.

"You want a coke? You like Coke right?" He offered and I nodded, not caring what I was brought.

"A coke, and bring us some water for the table too please." Matt said flatly, not one of them returning her flirts since we walked in.

"You ok?" Matt asked once she walked away.

"Yeah. Sorry.....I just panicked." I didn't want them to know she had freaked me out with a few, too long looks. It was silly.

"It's ok. You're doing really well today. It must all be so overwhelming." He kindly told me. I smiled, grateful he understood, as always.

"Take a look at the menu and choose what you want to eat, then I can order it for you when she comes." Cole suggested and I nodded eagerly, not wanting to speak to the waitress or look stupid in front of her again.

By the time she returned with drinks I already picked what I wanted, lasagne like my Mom used to make, and the guys didn't even need to look, obviously regulars in that place.

As the guys all gave her their order her gaze alternated between writing the order and staring way too hard at me. By the time she got to Cole, on the end, I was shaking with nerves, wondering what I had done to make her stare so much?

"I'll take the 15oz steak with salad and fries and we'll have a lasagne al forno too." Cole said as I tried hard to look anywhere but at her, glaring at me.

"You want fries or salad with that?" She asked, looking over to me.

"Olivia?" Cole asked. I took a deep breath and looked right at her, refusing to continue being foolish. It wasn't like she could hurt me. She couldn't get past one of the guys, never mind all four.

"Salad please." I said, but she didn't catch it. She squealed over me, scaring me badly.

"OH MY GOD!" She declared at the top of her voice, making everyone in the place look. I grabbed onto Kyle's thigh, the closest thing to me, and dug my nails into his denim. He and Kade had already shuffled to the front of their seats and pushed me back so they were partly blocking me on each side.

"It is you!" She declared. "I thought it was, but it couldn't be right? Olivia! You've been missing for years. Everyone said you were dead!" She laughed, like that was funny. I felt sick, my other hand now trying to steady my swaying body against Kade's back.

"You wanna lower your voice an octave?" Cole growled angrily, but she just ignored him and carried on.

"You were the grade below me at elementary school. Remember, Kelly Barnes?" I totally did not remember, but I was too out of it to answer anyway. "Anyway, what happened? Were you kidnapped by a pedo? That's what my dad said

happened, but there were stories you were like sex trafficked to Mexico?”

“Kelly! That’s enough. Take our order to the kitchen and tell Ricci it’s for Kade Maxwell. We’ll need it to take out now, ASAP.” Kade’s voice was a low rumble, not to be messed with and lucky for Kelly, whoever the hell she was, she got that and ran off to the back of the restaurant without another word.

“Princess, it’s ok. She’s gone now. Take a nice deep breath for me.” Kyle instructed as he appeared in my line of vision.

I didn’t even realise how badly I was gasping and swaying around until he was there, holding me steady with his hands holding the top of my arms. Everything around me seemed to be swaying and I was sure I would throw up.

It had just been so unexpected. My parents were dead. I hadn’t expected anyone to ever know who I even was, but she did. Did that mean more people would recognise me and know what happened, what I let happen?

“Hey! Hey! Love, look at me. You are still safe. She’s no one. We’re all here with you. We have you!” Kade said firmly as he too bent down so I could see him. Knowing he was right, I was safe with them, I made my eyes look around me, from one guy to the next, seeing they were all there for me. I fought to take deeper and deeper breaths and within minutes I was back, and a lot calmer, though still nauseous.

“Sorry.” I whispered once I had enough breath to do so. “I just....I didn’t....”

“It’s ok, beautiful. Just breathe. As soon as she brings the food we’ll get you home.” Cole soothed as he ran his hand over the top of mine where it rested on the table in front of me. over and over.

“Kyle, give me your keys. I’ll go and get the car and park it out front so we can get gone. We can drop Kade at his car on the way home, or bring him back for it later.” Matt said as he held out his hand to Kyle.

“Good idea.” Kyle agreed as he handed over the fancy key for the black SUV we had all driven over in.

“I won’t be long *Carina*.” Matt told me. I smiled, hoping to reassure him, then with a wink to me, he was out of the door.

It was twenty minutes and a lot of worried glances from the guys later when the waitress wordlessly brought out two big bags and dumped them aggressively on the table before us.

Kade pulled out his wallet and literally threw a one hundred dollar bill across the table to her.

“Tell Ricci I’ll be by later to talk with him about his staff member’s appalling lack of discretion.” He growled, then he pulled me up and wrapped his jacket around my shaking shoulders. “Let’s get out of here.” Kyle declared. He and Cole had all of our shopping bags split between them, so their hands were filled, but they stayed close to me, surrounding me, as we walked past all of the staring customers who had overheard every word Kelly had yelled. I saw them all gawking, wondering if I had been trafficked or taken by a pedo. I had never felt so self conscious.

Finally we got out into the street and I took my first full breath since she had pounced on me. Matt had text to say he got stuck in traffic but was a minute out, so we were just waiting for him.

“I’m so sorry, Love. I never thought anyone would harass you like that.” Kade said as he pulled me in even tighter against his side.

“It’s not your fault. I just never expected anyone to recognise me, never mind start spouting off their theories.”

“She was an idiot. Don’t take any notice of what she said.” Cole said flatly, no hint of his usual humour.

“She wasn’t wrong though, was she?”

“None of what you went through was your fault Liv. Don’t you dare take any of that on, and don’t let anyone judge you in

any way. You went through hell and came out the other side stronger. That's all that matters."

I opened my mouth to disagree, to say I refused to ever leave the house again, but I never got the chance because all hell broke out around us in a matter of seconds.

"There she is!" A guy shouted from across the street and I looked up just in time to see him hurtling toward me from a large white van, followed by about a dozen more people from several other vehicles pulling up.

"Shit!" Kade cursed as he spun me in his arms and hid me inside his jacket. He lifted me up, holding me against his chest.

"It's going to be ok Livy, we all got you." Kade said quickly. I glanced out just in time to see Cole charging through the crowd of people, all with cameras and microphones, like a Mac truck. Thankfully they all moved out of his path pretty quickly, and Kade was right behind him, with Kyle at the back. The strangers, who I quickly realised were reporters and press, were all shouting questions over each other and I clamped my hands hard over my ears in panic. I had no idea what was going on and my body surged with adrenaline, ready to defend itself.

The only thing stopping me from screaming in fear was the guys all around me, doing all they could to protect me.

I don't know when Matt had arrived with the car, but by the time we got across the street, he was there, opening the door and talking to me as Kade jumped in, but I couldn't hear him, too scared to move my hands.

Kade sat in the back seat with me in his lap and I turned in time to see Cole jump in beside us. Kyle and Matt were upfront, Kyle driving and we sped away fast once all of the doors were shut.

"What the hell happened?" Matt asked as he looked around to me with worry and confusion.

“That stupid fucking waitress must have called the press. There were a load of news networks there!” Kyle growled, and I knew he was angry, even hearing him through my hands.

“Guys, just cool it. Let’s give Olivia a few minutes quiet.” Cole said as he looked down at me and ran a hand over my forehead soothingly.

Silence filled the car except for the traffic noises outside and I just closed my eyes and tried to calm the adrenaline that was racing and making me antsy and shaky.

I was angry and upset, and so confused. Why was it every time I took a step forward, something ripped me back into the darkness? I just wanted to find a way to live my life. I was messed up and broken, and I knew it would never be perfect, but couldn’t I just take the shattered pieces I had remaining and be given some time to try and piece them together without everything being so damned hard?

I opened my eyes and looked out of the window as the city flew by at speed. It had all just been too much that day, adapting to the busy mall, remembering my dad, the crazy food hall and then everything that had just happened.

“Kyle, pull over!” I yelled.

“What? Why?” He asked as he looked up to me in the rearview.

“Kyle, please!” I cried. He got the car onto the shoulder of the large road just in time for me to throw the door open and leap out. I ran over to the grass verge and threw up several times. Tears were streaming down my face and I knew I was losing all control. Things just seemed so dark and I really couldn’t see my life ever getting past that recurring cycle of what had happened to me.

Exhausted I fell to my knees on the hard tarmac. I was gasping for breath from the effort it had taken me to vomit and I couldn’t stop crying or shaking.

“Come *Carina*.” Matt’s voice said softly from behind me. I felt his warm hands take my waist and lift me up to his chest. I

buried my face in his neck, knowing I must smell terrible, but needing him more than I cared about that. He didn't seem to care either as he gathered my legs in his other arm and held me tight against his chest.

“Let's get you home.” He whispered softly and I almost cried with relief at the thought of the place, just a few days ago, I worried I would never feel was home, but I had been wrong. Home was now wherever the guys were. They made me feel safe and protected and cared for. that was home, wasn't it?

Slowly he carried me back to the car and climbed into the back where Kade had been before. I saw Kade jump up front and once again we were moving, this time no one saying a thing the rest of the journey home.

“Matt, Cole, you guys get Olivia in and settled. I'm gonna call Rob and see if he'll send a couple of guys over to watch the gates for a few days until this all settles down. Kade, you call Mom and Dad. If any of those reporters works out who we are, we don't want them catching either of them off guard.” Kyle ordered, always so calm and in control, the complete opposite to me. Inside I felt like my head was going to explode. I just couldn't handle anymore crap being thrown at me. I survived *The Shadow* and *The Darkness* all to get home to my parents, only to find them both gone, then I get this second chance with this awesome new family and I'm too fucked up to keep it together for more than a few hours at a time, with them. Now the press were after me, wanting to drag up every horrible thing that happened to me. It seemed like it would never end and I knew there was no hope for me ever finding any kind of version of a normal life. I was broken, my life destroyed and worse of all, that interested the nation. They wanted to know how fucked up what happened to me was, they wanted to read the sick stories over their oatmeal in the morning. This wasn't some drama for everyone to gawp at though. It was my life, what was left of it, and after having it ripped from me for eight years, didn't I deserve to have what remained in peace?

“Stay here Olivia.” I heard Matt say as he placed me on the back seat and climbed out. “I'll just help Cole grab the bags,

then I'll come help you out, ok?" I nodded blindly, not really listening. Kyle and Kade were both still in the front seat on their cells, both talking, but I wasn't listening to them either. They had all been so amazing since I moved there. The fur of them was all that was holding me together and making me feel brave enough to keep going. I cared for all of them, maybe even more than I dare admit, and I thought they cared for me too, but in that moment I just felt like I was suffocating, and dragging the four of them down with me.

I looked out of the back window and saw the electric gates just starting to close. Not thinking clearly, just knowing I needed space to breathe, I leapt from the car, the door sat open as Matt had left it while he ran inside with hands filled with bags.

I ran down the block pave driveway, the cold whipping at my bare arms.

"Liv! Get back here!" Kyle yelled just as I slipped through the tiny gap remaining in the gates. I got through just before they closed and I just ran as fast as I could, tears streaming down my face the whole time.

By the time I reached the end of the street I heard all of the guys yelling for me from much further back, but I couldn't turn back. I had a good head start, since the guys would either have to wait for the gates to reopen, or scale the tall rails. I just needed some time to fall apart without upsetting or worrying anyone. I needed space and freedom, just for a few hours. I'd go back when I got my head straight again.

I ran for miles. It was freezing cold and all I wore was jeans, my boots and a thin t-shirt, but I was too upset to be affected by it. By the time I stopped, my feet, still bad with injuries, were too painful to keep on running. The sun was beginning to set and I knew I had to have been running for an hour, maybe more.

I hadn't thought I'd paid any attention to where I was going, but when I stopped, gasping for breath and shaking with the cold, I looked up and realised I was just a block from home, my real home.

Spurred on by a desperate need to see my little cottage I ran even harder, down the block I knew so well, and onto the little street lined with neat little cottages just like the one I grew up in.

I sped down the street, past houses that used to be owned by kind neighbours with kids I had once loved to play with, out on that very street. What had once been beautifully neat little gardens, were now all badly overgrown. Most of the cottages were boarded up, those that weren't had smashed windows and graffiti covering them. It was like the entire street had been abandoned.

I stopped outside my home, my safe place and a sob burst from me. It too had been boarded up and there was graffiti spray painted over where there had once been a beautifully painted blue door, the last place I ever saw my mom, stood there waving me off to school.

All of the window boxes were long gone and the front yard was badly overgrown, like a jungle.

I shakily moved around the side, hoping there would still be some memory of my family left to see, but as I reached the back yard and saw the back of the cottage, heavily boarded too, the house no longer white, but filthy grey and dilapidated, I realised every single part of my old life was gone. Everything I had once held dear had died while I spent so many years fighting to live.

I fell to my knees on the lawn in the backyard. The grass was so long I disappeared into it and I was more than happy to stay gone too. I just wanted my Mom and Dad. I felt like the nine year old I had been the last morning I was at that house, the nine year old who only ever needed a hug from her parents to make everything better.

But there was no hug for me, no parents. I felt alone and scared and so completely overwhelmed. Why did I even survive through all of that horror, if loss was all that would ever await me when I escaped?

CHAPTER 11

KYLE

“Anything?” I asked as I called my Dad for the third time. We were all out searching for her. Mom and Dad were out with Evie in one car, Matt and Cole were out in Cole’s truck, and Kade and I had split up too. Even Xander and Simon had left work and were driving around in the search.

She had been gone for three hours and I was beyond terrified for her. She was only wearing a t-shirt and she was not in a good headspace.

Kade and I had both leapt the fence right after her, but she was so damned fast, and she had already disappeared by the time we got to the end of the street. We’d set out after her right away, calling Mom and Dad en route, but she had just

disappeared completely and I was really starting to worry she had been picked up somewhere.

“No son, nothing. Where is she?” Dad asked and I knew he was as worried as we all were. They cared deeply for Olivia.

“I think it’s time we talk to Kade about getting a proper search party together. There’s a chance the creep who took her all those years ago, could have been watching her and grabbed her.” It hurt me to even say it. I would never forgive myself if she had been taken again.

“God, please don’t let that have happened.” Grant gasped.
“But you’re right. I’ll call Kade and see what he wants us to do.”

“Let me know. I’m headed to her old neighbourhood, from before. I found the address in the old news reports. Worth a try.” I mused.

“Good idea. Call me right away if you find her. Your Mom is sick with worry.”

I agreed and hung up, throwing my bluetooth earpiece down hard on the passenger seat in anger. I shouldn’t have let this happen. I should have seen how upset and scared she was and been prepared for her to flee. I would have, if I’d have been ambushed by strangers as she had. I’d just want some space from everyone and I’d run. I should have fucking known!

My feelings for Olivia were only growing stronger by the day. She was just so amazing, so quietly clever and talented, so strong and brave and so damned beautiful. Whenever she smiled at me, it made my heart stutter, and I had to fight the need to hold her every time she walked into a room. I had never felt that way about anyone and it was only getting stronger. I knew I couldn’t have her though. She was fragile, and delicate, and I was a seriously fucked up mess. She deserved far better than me when one day she felt ready, and I would have to live with that. Instead I had vowed to protect her with everything I had, starting with finding her, no matter

how long it took. If that monster had taken her, I would never stop until I found her again.

I pulled into the street she grew up on, and was shocked to see it had all but been abandoned, the houses boarded up and vandalised. None of the street lights were working, so I flicked to full beam and drove slowly, scouring every house for her, since I didn't know which of them was once her home.

Having no luck I decided to get out and check round back of each house quickly. It seemed a good possibility she would come back to somewhere familiar and what was more familiar than home?

I parked my truck at the top of the street and pulled a large flashlight from my trunk. I also grabbed the baseball bat I kept there, not knowing how dangerous this neighbourhood was. I had my gun in the glovebox, but that seemed unnecessary and I didn't want to scare Liv, if I found her.

I got halfway down the houses on the right side of the block before I found evidence the grass around one of the houses had been disturbed, trodden down on the right side leading round back.

Desperately hoping she was there, but worried sick for the state she'd be in if she was, I rounded the corner and walked into the heavily overgrown backyard.

At first glance everything looked to be untouched, but when I went closer with the flash light, I saw a small trail where the grass had been flattened again. I followed it to the back of the yard and there, amongst the overgrown grass, was Olivia, laid on her side, curled up tight in a ball, shaking and whimpering. She looked blue and I knew I needed to get her home and warm before hypothermia set in, if it hadn't already. She had to have been laid there for hours.

I pulled off the peacoat I was wearing and laid it over her as I dropped to my knees beside her.

"Liv? Can you hear me Princess?" I asked, while I pulled out my cell and hit 'Dad' and loudspeaker. It rang once before he

picked up.

“Kyle?”

“Dad, I’ve got her.”

“Oh, thank God! Is she ok?”

“She’s turning blue and she’s not responding. I’m getting her home. Be ready to get her warmed up.”

“We’ll be ready, and I’ll call Xander. Just hurry son.” I hung up then, not wanting to waste time, and shoved my cell in my jeans pocket.

“Liv, it’s just me baby. I’m going to lift you up and get you home now, ok?” I said softly, not wanting to scare her.

“I want my Mom.” She whispered, sounding so much like a child in distress. It killed me that I couldn’t get her what she needed.

“I know, but you’re not on your own. You have all of us, and my Mom and Dad. They love you.” As soon as I got her in my arms I knew it was bad. She was as cold as ice and not shivering at all. That was a bad sign.

“Kyle?” She asked, seeming confused.

“Yeah baby. I’m here. I’ve got you now. You’re going to be just fine.” I was running now, as fast as I could to my car. I placed her gently in the passenger seat and wrapped my coat as tightly around her as I could beneath the seatbelt,

As soon as I climbed in I cranked the heat and raced toward home as fast as I could safely go.

Liv seemed out of it, alternating between whimpering, crying and trying to talk.

“Nothing.....nothing.” I heard her saying again and again.

“What is it Liv, what’s nothing?” I asked, desperate to comfort her in some way.

“S’ all gone.” She whispered, sounding slurred.

“What has?”

“Everything.....me.....I’m all gone.....no parents.....no home.....n-nothing.” She slurred slowly. I looked to her, seeing her devastation and wished like hell there was something I could do to shoulder her pain. “Why Kyle? I kept going.....kept fighting and letting him.....oh God!” She whimpered and I reached out and took her frozen hand in mine. “Why? There’s nothing left.....I’m alone. I sh-should have d-died.”

“Do not say that. You lived for a reason Olivia. You may not see it yet, but you will in time. And you are not alone. You have us. All of us. We love you and we need you as much as you need us. You complete us guys, give us a piece that was missing. If you’d have died you’d have taken our missing pieces with you.”

“No.....s’not true.....not good enough.....not for any of you.....dirty.....I.....I’m damaged.”

She was crying and her words were barely coming out between sobs, but I caught enough to know I wasn’t getting through to her, not in the state she was in. Instead I squeezed her hand, just trying to reassure her I was with her.

“You will always have me Princess, no matter what. I will always take care of you. You’re not alone, you never will be.” I promised, hoping it got through to her somehow, then focused on getting us back home as quickly as I could.

She seemed to deflate at that promise, stopped fighting and just let herself settle in the seat, her head becoming heavy and falling to rest on my thigh as she flopped down across the seat. Panicked I moved my hand to her stomach and felt for it moving with each breath, Thankfully it was, and the breaths seemed regular, if a little slow.

I kept my hand there the entire way home, needing to feel her breathing to keep my cool enough to get her back. She scared the shit out of me that night and I would never let her be in danger like that again. I had to keep her closer, we all did. She was becoming way too important to all of us. It would destroy my entire family if anything happened to her, but especially

my brothers. I couldn't let that happen, not to them and not to her.

OLIVIA

“Olivia, Honey? Can you hear me?” I was pretty sure it was Keira, but it sounded like she was standing at the end of a long tunnel, her voice all tinny and echoing around my head. “Open your eyes for me now, sweet girl.” She encouraged. My entire body ached, and for one awful second I panicked that The Shadow had hurt me, that everything had been a dream, and I was still there.

In a panic I forced my eyes open, the effort taking way too much energy. Finally I got them open and found Keira right before me, her face only a few inches from mine. She was there and she was real. I wasn't back in The Darkness. I was safe. I glanced around quickly, realising I was in my room at their home, tucked into the bed.

“Hey.” I whispered, my voice barely coming out. She smiled, but it was an effort for her. She looked stressed out and so worried, her eyes red and puffy as though she had been crying.

“Hi Honey. You gave me a real scare, you know that?” Her voice broke halfway through and I knew she was crying. Did I do that? Did I scare her? Everything seemed blurry in my brain and I couldn't remember what had happened past being at the mall with the guys that morning.

“The guys?” I asked. Were they all ok? Had we had an accident of some kind? Panic rose within me as I fought to remember. If anything had happened to any of them.....

“We're all here, Love. You're ok. You're home and you're safe.” Kade said as he stepped forward. I looked behind him and checked over each of the four guys, but they all seemed unscathed.

“It hurts.” I admitted as I tried to move a little and couldn’t.

“Xander is on his way. Until he gets here we need to get you warmed up. You’re too cold.”

“Cold?” I didn’t feel cold....I just felt pain, lots of aching pain.

“Body heat is the quickest method.” Grant’s voice said and I looked up and found him standing behind his wife. His suit jacket was gone and his shirt was untucked and badly rumpled. He looked like he’d been through hell. “Olivia, would you be ok with Keira or one of the guys getting into bed with you, hugging you to get your body temp up?”

I barely nodded once before all four of the guys were shucking their coats and moving to the bed. Kyle and Matt reached me first, one on either side. They slid under the comforter I lay under, fully dressed, and both wrapped their huge arms around me tightly. Kade and Cole climbed in behind them and I felt their hands touching my waist too. I had no idea how they all fit in my bed when they were each as built as they were, but they did it and it was comforting to feel them with me.

“I meant one of you.” Grant grumbled, but I was glad they had all climbed in.

“It’s ok.” I whispered. I looked to Matt, who faced me. He smiled, but I saw the tense set of his jaw.

“Wh-what happened?” I asked.

“That doesn’t matter for now *Carina*. Just rest and let us get you warm.”

But it mattered to me. Last time I had blacked out and lost hours, I was found covered in blood that wasn’t my own. Had that happened again, had I hurt someone or lost my mind? Was I really insane?

“Matt....I’m scared.” I admitted tearfully.

“There is nothing to be scared of, beautiful girl. We’re all here and we have you, always. You’re safe and you’re home. The rest can wait.” Cole said from where I could see him over Matt’s shoulder.

“He’s right, Love. Just rest for us, ok?” Kade agreed and I felt what I guessed was his hand, squeeze slightly on my waist.

I tried to fight the fatigue, but I was exhausted and just felt so safe with all of them close, holding me. In that moment, no idea what had happened or what I had done, suddenly none of it mattered, because with the four of them at my side, I felt brave and whole, even if just for a little while.

I startled awake only a short time later, my body trembling uncontrollably and scaring me to hell. I looked around frantically and found Kyle before me and Kade over his shoulder.

I looked over to them with wide eyes, trying to assess what was happening. My first thought was it was adrenaline, surging into me because there was danger, but after a second I realised I was freezing, so much so I was shivering uncontrollably, my teeth chattering.

“You’re alright Princess. It’s your body kicking in, trying to warm you up. It’s a good thing.” Kyle explained hurriedly.

“I-It d-oesn’t f-feel g-good.” I replied, barely able to form words with how badly my teeth chattered.

“He’s right sweetheart. It will pass soon.” I looked up and found Xander leant down over me. He was dressed in slacks and white shirt, both of which looked as though he’d had them on for days. His hair was wild and he had rings beneath his eyes.

“Xander. Y-you look s-so tired.” I said with worry as I studied him harder.

“I dare say I do. You scared ten years off my life today Livy.” He looked more worried than mad, but there was definitely anger there.

“I’m s-sorry.”

“Xand, lay off. She doesn’t even remember what happened yet.” Kyle growled as he held me against him even tighter. I

could feel Matt's hard body behind me and I realised I had turned around at some point.

"Here, more blankets and I warmed some wheat bags too." Keira declared as she hurried in with the pile of blankets from the lounge and two purple wheat bags. "How are you Honey?" She asked as she handed Kade the bags and started opening the folded blankets and laying them over the comforter.

"C-cold." I replied.

"Boys, can't you get closer? She needs more heat." Keira snapped.

"Cole, do not move any closer to me man. We're already waaay too close." Matt growled, making me smile a little.

"I...I'm ok g-guys. You d-don't h-have to stay." I stuttered, hoping secretly they wouldn't up and leave even though I offered them the out.

"We're not going anywhere *Carina*. You're stuck with all of us." Matt whispered and I got the impression he meant for longer than it took me to warm up. I could live with that.

"I can help!" Evie cried and before anyone could react she ran into the room and threw herself right onto the centre of the bed, on top of me.

Kyle managed to catch her and take some of the weight, but I still let out a loud grunt in pain.

"Evie no! What are you thinking? Olivia is sick. You just hurt her." Grant scolded as he reached over to Kyle and grabbed her.

"Are you ok?" Matt asked as he rubbed a hand up my side, as if checking for injury.

"F-fine. I just w-wasn't ex-pecting it."

"I just wanted to help Livia!" Evie pouted, looking devastated.

"I...I'm ok Evie. Don't g-get upset." I pleaded.

“But I want to cuddle too. I was scared...I thought I lost my sister!” She cried and I saw a tear run down her cheek.

“Oh Honey. C-come on. You c-can cuddle too.” It hurt, but I lifted my arm and held it out to her. Kyle lifted the comforter, weighed down with countless blankets, and helped Grant settle Evie beside me, on top of him. I moved my arm around her waist and squeezed her in a hug. “You’re n-not going t-to lose me.” I whispered as I kissed her head.

“Promise?” She asked as she looked up at me with those big blue eyes filled with tears.

“Promise.” I agreed. She wrapped her little arm around my neck and held on tight and I knew that in that moment she had repaired a small part of me somewhere inside. We created a true bond in that moment, something real and forever. She was my family and there was nothing I would not do for her.

Xander leant in and took my temperature then, running a digital thermometer across my forehead.

“Better. It’s going up. The shivering will ease soon, but you’re going to be achy and have a headache for a day or so.” He warned.

“I’ve h-handled worse.” I replied flippantly, then dared not look around me at the guy’s reactions to my comment. I hadn’t meant to say that.

“If you can, get some sleep. You need the rest and you’ll feel much better for it.” Xander added, letting me off the hook.

“Come on munchkin. Let’s go watch TV and let Olivia have some sleep.” Grant said as he reached his arms out for her.

“You promise you won’t run away again Livia?” She asked as she looked up to me with worry.

Run away? And then I remembered running through the gates, the guys yelling after me. It all came back, the mall and restaurant, Kelly, and the reporters. I remembered going to my home, and there being nothing of what it once was, left. It was all gone, everything that once made up my existence, all gone.

I remembered collapsing in the garden, but that was the last thing.

“I wasn’t running a-away Evie. I like it h-here, with all o-of you. I just.....I had a really b-bad day and I panicked. It w-was so silly of m-me to run like I did though. It was d-dangerous and I.....I worried everyone.” I told her firmly, not wanting her to think it was ok to bolt everytime things got tough. I had been so selfish to do what I did, especially when I knew the guys were worried about The Shadow coming back for me. “I promise you s-sweetie, I w-will not leave you.”

“Good, cause I really need a sister, with all of these boys!” She pointed around her with the attitude I knew so well, making me smile. She was just too cute.

“Don’t worry. I g-got your back.” I whispered, making her smile even wider. She kissed my cheek, then jumped from Kyle into her Dad’s waiting arms, making Kyle grunt in the process.

“Rest now Olivia. We won’t be far if you need anything.” Grant told me. He wrapped his free arm around his wife, his daughter held in the other and left the room, closing the door behind him.

Xander pulled the chair from my dressing table over to the bedside and sat down.

“I’m staying for a while to keep an eye on you.” He said firmly, before plopping down in it exhaustedly.

“I’m so s-sorry guys.” I said as loudly as I could. My voice had improved over the last few days, but it seemed it would always have a rasp to it and I still struggled talking at times. This seemed like one of those times. “I meant what I j-just said. I wasn’t r-running away. I just.....I was scared a-nd upset. I just needed space. I never m-meant to cause all th-this trouble.”

“Liv, you are almost an adult. No one here is really going to try and tell you what to do. We just want to keep you safe and running off like that, when we don’t know where your

kidnapper is, was really dangerous.” Kyle began, his voice gentle, but with a touch of firmness, letting me know I had made him mad acting as I had. “If you need space, then you just tell us and we’ll do everything we can to see you get it, but safely. I don’t know if you noticed, but we all care about you a fuck of a lot princess. We’d be broken if anything happened to you, all of us.”

Cole, Kade and Matt pressed their hands against my body where they held me, in agreement and when I looked to Xander he nodded and smiled too. I had thought they all cared about me before, they all tried too hard to look out for me to let me doubt it, but seeing their worry when I opened my eyes that day, and the state of Xander, Keira and Grant too, even Evie, it affirmed those thoughts for me. They did all care about me and wanted me to be there with them.

It helped ease the pain from earlier, at the realisation my past was gone completely. My hopes to get my life back, to see my parents and sleep in my home, to just be me again, it was all gone. But there, with the guys and a family who cared for me, there was a new hope, hope for a future I had no plans for. It would be scary and uncertain, especially with the darkness of the past hanging over me, but it was there and I needed to grab on while I could.

“I know, because I’d feel the s-same if anything happened to one of you. You guys, a-all of you, I c-care for you too.”

“Just sleep now, beautiful. You’re exhausted. We’re going to stay with you.” Cole said and I felt his hand brush down my cheek, sweeping away wild strands of hair, his touch so gentle, as always.

I closed my eyes as he continued to soothe me with his gentle strokes on my cheek and within minutes, maybe even seconds, I was out.

COLE

“Her temp is back to normal and her vitals seem steady. I’m going to head out.” Xander declared. It was late into the night, just after two AM. We had all laid with her for an hour after she dropped off, then it just got too hot and crowded, so we decided to take it in turns to lay with her instead. Matt was currently beside her and Kade and Kyle were laid out on blankets on the floor. They were supposed to be sleeping, but they weren’t. I knew because I was the same. I needed eyes on her, to know she was safe.

An hour into the search for her that night, I was sure we had fucked up, and she had been taken by that psycho kidnapper. Matt and I had both been in pieces, sure we had lost her for good and I knew if we had, not one of us, me and my brothers, would survive it; Xander, because she had become family to him, and the rest of us because she had become so much more.

I knew my feelings for her; I was crazy about her, had been since the second I saw her, those dark blue eyes staring widely at me from beneath the dirt and grime. Since then she had only enraptured me more and more with her strength, determination, intelligence and kindness. I had known her less than a week and I was falling badly for her, feeling a bond with her that I had never felt with anyone, not even my brothers.

Problem was, I knew I wasn’t the only one. Matt, Kade and Kyle all looked at her just the way I did. They were in deep too.

It wasn’t an issue for any of us. The way we had all grown up had messed with us, so badly, that once we found each other, found our family, we had all clung on hard.

Xander obviously found his own path and had a good relationship with Simon, but he didn’t have the same messed up past the four of us had. He had a good family once, who loved him. He had to go through the hell of losing them, and I knew it had been harrowing for him, but he hadn’t been broken at the hands of others, as the four of us all had.

We came from seriously fucked up childhoods. We had been broken at the hands of, or because of the people who should have loved us most, and it had left us all angry, confused and broken. It had taken us all along time to heal as much as we had, and without each other, we would never have survived the trauma. It was only the fact that we could all always count on each other, and turn to each other on the worst days, that had made us as whole as we were, and that was still very far from fully whole. We needed each other and we knew it.

We had discussed poly relationships before, even shared girls in the past, although nothing serious.

It wasn't that we weren't capable of a normal relationship. I knew we all were, had even had a few between us. It was more that none of us wanted that. Conventional relationships just didn't seem to work for any of us, all of us having tried them at some point in the last few years.

The four of us had each come from a background of abuse in one form or another, some worse than others, but all really messed up. We had spent the early years of our lives fighting alone, completely alone.

Coming to Keira and Grant, and finding our family, finding each other, it had been a monumental moment in each of our lives. Over time, as we healed, it brought us small amounts of happiness and peace, but also safety and support. None of us were ready to ever let that go. We just worked together, as a unit, the four of us, so it made sense that one day we could handle a relationship together. We just never actually expected it to happen. We never thought we'd find a girl we all cared for enough, who would be willing to be in a relationship with four, over protective, messed up guys like us.

Olivia coming into our home just seemed like fate. It was obvious we all wanted her and if I read her correctly, I was pretty sure she liked each of us. She was no longer afraid to touch us or hug us and she smiled often when we were all together.

I wanted to think it could work with her, we could have the family unit we all needed and wanted, but I knew I was getting ahead of myself. Olivia had been through hell, and I was pretty sure from the statement she gave Kade, that bastard who took her, had sexually abused her too. She may not ever want a relationship and even if she did, I was pretty sure one with four guys wouldn't be what she would be looking for. Still. It was a good daydream.

“Cole? You ok?” Xander asked, snapping me from my thoughts.

“Sorry, tired.” I laughed with a smile.

“Get some rest bro. It's been a tough day for all of us.” He slapped my shoulder, then headed out of Olivia's room.

“Is he leaving?” I asked, having no idea what he'd been saying while I was lost in thought.

“Yeah. He worked an eighteen hour shift yesterday. He only just got home when Dad called him to search for Liv. He's beat.” Kyle explained.

“I know the feeling.” I sighed as I laid out on the blankets I had set out on the floor, at the foot of the bed. Kade and Kyle were off to the side where each of them had set up too, laid out, but propped up on an elbow, watching over her as she slept peacefully in Matt's arms.

“We need to watch her more closely guys. We never should have allowed that to happen today.” Kade sighed.

“We will.” I agreed. I’d never take my damned eyes off her ever again.

“There’s something else we need to talk about.” Kyle said seriously. I sat up, worried, and waited for him to go on. “She was out of it when I found her and not making a lot of sense, but she wanted her parents. She kept on saying she had nothing, that she was gone. Her home, her whole street, has been abandoned and is messed up. She was asking me why she survived what she did, to come back to nothing.” Kyle stopped talking abruptly, as though he dared not go on.

“She wanted to have died?” Matt said from the bed. I looked up and found him sat up. Looking at all of us.

“Yeah. That’s what she said. I don’t know if she meant it, or if it was just because she was in a state, but I think, for a while at least, we need to keep an eye on her and make sure we all know if anything like that comes up at all.”

“She wouldn’t do that.” I protested, shocked. “She’s so strong. She fought and she survived. She wouldn’t do that now, would she?”

“She came home thinking her home would be waiting for her, with loving parents and a good life. Instead she was completely alone. It must be a scary world for her right now.” Matt sounded so flat as he spoke and I hated to hear him that way. It reminded me of the crushed ten year old boy he had been the first day I met him, when Jenny brought him into the house for the first time.

“She’s not alone now. She has all of us, and our family. She’ll never be alone.” Kade ground out through clenched teeth. I was sure he, like me, hated the idea she was that desperate.

“We need to prove that to her, then that is what we do.”

“I agree. She had a really bad day yesterday. She might not have meant what she said. We just need to make sure she sees how much we all care about her and want her here.” I agreed.

“And do we?” Kyle asked, his voice even quieter. “All care for her?”

“Of course we do!” Matt snapped.

“I think Kyle’s asking if we more than care for her.” I hurried to add, seeing Matt getting mad at Kyle even daring to question his feelings for Livy.

“You think she’s the one?” Kade asked.

“Don’t you?” Kyle countered with raised eyebrows.

“Yeah, I do. I have feelings for her that started the second I saw her.”

“Me too.” I admitted, relieved they were talking about what had been plaguing my thoughts.

“And me.” Matt agreed. “She’s special. I really think....hope we could make it work with her.”

“I agree, but we need to go really slow with her. She needs time. She’s been through so much. She’s not ready for us all to start turning it on with her.” Kade warned, just what I had been worrying about.

“Kade’s right. No matter how much we all want this. The whole thing has to move at her pace, everything moving at her speed. She may not even be open to the kind of relationship we’re looking for. It’s far from conventional.” I could see the fear in Kyle’s face as he spoke, fear that she wouldn’t want us as much as we all wanted and needed her.

“So for now we just keep things as they are, be there for her and see how things go?” I asked.

“Yes.” Kade nodded. “We just show her that we are there for her no matter what and we work harder at keeping her safe. I’m sure she has feelings too, I’ve seen the way she looks at us, but the ball has to be in her court. She has to be ready to take things further before anything happens.”

“First things first, we need to take care of the motherfucker who held her, and hurt her. You get anywhere with what she

gave you on the kidnapper? We need to catch that fucker so she can be safe.” Kyle asked.

“Nothing yet. The guy’s DNA isn’t in the system and I checked satellite photos for the area she described, but it’s too dense with woods. I contacted the police over that way. They’re going to look into it, ask around the closest towns to where she was found. I’m putting everything I can into it, but I have these multiple murders to focus on too.”

“I can talk to Rob, see if he’ll let me use company resources to track the kidnapper. He’ll understand. His wife was kidnapped a few years ago.”

“Whatever you can do. Like you said, we need to get him off the streets and make sure she’s safe,” Kade agreed.

Scrambling on the bed had us all on our feet and looking down at Olivia, who was fighting her invisible attacker, her mouth open in agony. Matt grabbed her and held her tight against him. She fought him for a minute, but as soon as he whispered to her, assuring her she was safe, she settled again.

“Just find that sonofabitch, guys.” I growled, angry she had to suffer at all. If there was any way I could take it from her I would, in a heartbeat. “He needs to pay.”

“He will.” Kyle agreed.

Knowing Olivia would need us all the next day, we laid down and tried to sleep. My last thought before I dropped off was that maybe a relationship with all of us would be what Olivia needed too, to keep her safe and take care of her after everything she had been through. Maybe four messed up, broken guys could do that more than one whole one.

One thing was for sure, no one could ever care for her more than we all did.

CHAPTER 12

OLIVIA

The guys were all driving me crazy! I scared them the previous day, and they were all worried I'd flip out on them again, I got it! But did that mean one of them literally had to be attached to me at every single second of the day?

It had been nice at first, waking up this morning and finding them all camped out in my room with me, knowing they had all been there, all night, just for me. They had been worried about me and tried hard to encourage me to just spend the day

resting in bed, but I was feeling a lot better. I had slept pretty well, and while my body felt a little achy in places, for the most part I was good, so I turned them down on that and got up, knowing if I just lay there all day, I would end up consumed by terrifying memories and dark thoughts. I needed to get up and keep going, keep trying to move forward.

That was where my irritation had begun. I had gone to my closet to get clothes for the day, and when I came back out, all four of them were at the door watching me like an animal in the zoo.

I had thought it was odd, but just let them be, since I had scared them so badly the day before, but then I headed to the shower and Kyle tried to follow.

“What are you doing?” I asked when I tried to close the door and found him blocking it.

“You could pass out in the shower. You shouldn’t even be up.” He’d explained. I rolled my eyes, swallowing my comment that he was being ridiculous.

“I’m fine Kyle. You’re not coming in here when I’m..... naked.” I whispered the last word, my cheeks still flushing with embarrassment anyway.

“I’ve seen naked girls before. Besides. I won’t look. I’ll face the wall, scouts honour.”

“No, sorry. Not happening.” I tried to sound strong and determined, but I knew there was a tremble in my voice. The guys had never tried to see me without clothes before. I never thought they would be that way, and I still didn’t really. I knew it was more likely Kyle was just being super overprotective, but I couldn’t stop the little voice in my head that was screaming he was a man, just like The Shadow.

“You’re not locking yourself in there alone!” Kyle all but growled, scaring me a little.

“Why do you care? You never did before?”

“Things were different before.”

“Please Kyle....” I whimpered, tearing up and feeling so confused about the guy I had already put my trust in, now being an asshole with me. “Please don’t push me.”

“Hey, no crying.” Kade stepped into the doorway, shoving Kyle slightly aside. “It’s ok Love. No one is going to push you into anything. Maybe just leave the door unlocked for Kyle this morning, yeah? He’s pretty shaken up after last night, we all are.”

“You won’t come in though, right?” I asked shakily as I looked up to Kyle’s tense face.

“Not unless I need to.” He grumbled.

“Kyle!” Cole snapped from where he sat on the bottom of my bed. “Go shower Brains. No one is coming in unless you ask us to. You got my word on that.” I looked through the gap between Kyle and Kade, to Cole and saw the genuineness of his words, clear across his face. Kyle was being an ass, but I still had faith in the others.

I was nervous showering after that, and had done the whole thing in under five minutes, the whole time watching the door handle, ready to run if it turned. I knew it was foolish because I knew Kyle and until that morning he had been nothing, but good, but he had worried me that morning and I was shaken by it.

When I did come out of the bathroom, the guys were all showered and changed too, and stood waiting for me.

“You guys didn’t need to wait for me.” I said nervously.

“We wanted to.” Was Matt’s reply. They had then all followed me downstairs to breakfast. Luckily for me, Keira and Grant had headed out to work, so I didn’t have to deal with them being overbearing too, but the guys made up for it, making me sit at the table and not allowing me to lift a finger. I was barely allowed to feed myself the mountain of pancakes Matt had made for me. As always, I only managed a very small amount, then I had a lecture from Kyle about eating more.

Annoyed and needing space I had picked up my book from the kitchen counter and headed to the media room, only to be followed by Cole and Kyle.

I sat in the corner of the large sectional and tried to read, while Kyle and Cole started an action movie they supposedly wanted to watch. Ten minutes in and I was pretty sure they hadn't seen any of it, since every time I glanced up, they were both just watching me.

I tried for another ten minutes to ignore them, but I hated to be watched. It was what The Shadow had liked to do, stand over me and just watch me.

Annoyed I had stormed out, ignoring their calls to find out what I was doing, and decided to head to my room.

I got halfway up the stairs when I heard fast approaching footsteps. I turned and found Matt just starting up the stairs after me.

“Don't you dare!” I yelled, frustrated.

“What? I just thought you might like some company?” He said innocently, but there was nothing innocent about this whole morning. They had me on lockdown and it was not going to work for me.

“Where's Kade?” I asked.

“Kitchen, why?” Matt asked. But I was already charging down the stairs again. I pushed past Matt and walked into the kitchen where Kade sat at the centre island surrounded by paperwork.

“Hey Love. Are you ok?” He asked the second I walked in.

“No, I'm not.” I sighed. “Come with me.” I beckoned. Matt was following too, and I led them both back to the media room where Kyle and Cole still sat.

“What's going on?” Cole asked.

“That's what I'd like to know.” I snapped. I was mad. They had all worked so hard to make me trust them over the week I

had been there, so why were they trying so hard to piss me off now? “I get it you guys, ok? I made a bad mistake running like that yesterday and I scared you all badly. But I also already told you I will not do it again, so why do you all feel it necessary to stalk me around the house today, huh?”

“We’re not stalking you.” Kyle began.

“You are! You tried to come into the damn bathroom with me this morning Kyle, which by the way did nothing but make me question the trust I thought I could have in you.”

“What is that supposed to mean? You can trust me, you know you can.” He cried. I sighed and flopped down on the sofa across from him.

“I thought I could. I thought I was safe with you, but this morning, you trying to bully your way into the bathroom with me. All I could think was.....was you wanted to....to look at me.....you know, like that.....like *him*.” I admitted shakily.

“Jesus Liv. I would never....” Kyle gasped, but I cut him off.

“I know Kyle. I know. I just....the thought was there for a second and it....it scared me, you scared me.

“Then all of you are being weird, following me and watching me like I might explode at any moment. It’s freaking me out!” I cried.

“That’s not what we wanted at all Olivia. We were all just so scared when we thought we lost you last night. I know we’re overreacting this morning, but we all just need to know you’re safe.” Cole explained.

“I would never do anything that I thought would scare you. I’m so sorry, Princess.” Kyle looked so guilty as he apologised and I felt bad for even telling him how he’d made me feel, but I was just so confused.

“I get it. I scared you. You thought something bad happened, but it didn’t. I’m here and I’m fine. Am I not safe in this house?” I asked.

“Yes, of course you are. The place is locked up like Fort Knox and we have a top security system.” Kade replied.

“Then please.....please just back off. You guys have been so great and I love spending time with all of you, but I can’t handle you all watching me 24/7 like some crazy person. That’s what he did, just watched me. He had cameras and they would turn to follow me around the room, then when I slept, he would be in there, just watching me. I...I can’t go back to that. I need to feel free. Please.....just understand.” I begged as a sob escaped. Kade rushed from where he stood beside the door and sat beside me, wrapping his arm over my shoulders and pulling me in against him.

“It’s ok Love. We get it. We’ll back off and give you some space.” He soothed as he held me.

“We just care about you *Carina*, that’s why we were so worried.” Matt added.

“I know, and that means so much to me. I never expected to find all of the care I have found in this home and I am grateful for it, all of it. I’d be completely lost without you guys and I don’t want you to think I’m pushing any of you away. I just.....I need things to go back to how they were before I messed it all up yesterday.”

“You didn’t mess anything up, beautiful. We’re all being way too over the top. You were right to put a stop to it. We all understand, right?” Cole asked, with a pointed glare to Kyle. They all nodded, though Kyle looked reluctant to agree.

“Thank you.” I whispered as I wiped away the last of my tears and tried to pull it together.

“Just promise you’ll come to one of us, yeah?” Kyle said. I looked at him and saw pain in his face. I knew he had found me the previous night and I wondered what the hell I had done to scare him so badly. “When things get too loud, or too hard, or just too much, come to one of us. Don’t run.”

“I will. I promise.” I kept my eyes locked on his, as I made the promise, assuring him I meant it. I would do whatever it took

to stop these guys worrying about me anymore. It was taking a toll on all of them and I hated it.

“Thank you.” Kyle nodded in that stoic way he does often, and I knew it was settled.

“I’m a little tired so I’m going to lay down in my room for a while with my book.” I declared. It had been an emotional rollercoaster of a morning and I just needed some silence.

“I’m gonna head into the precinct for a few hours too. I’ll be back tonight,” Kade said as he stood beside me and kissed my forehead gently. “Just text me if you need anything,”

I nodded, then turned and walked out of the room, hoping the whole way to my room that no one followed after me.

It seemed they had all listened, since they left me be for the rest of the morning.

The remainder of the day passed smoothly. The guys just left me to my own devices until lunch, then we all ate together, except Kade who was at work.

After lunch I watched a movie with Kyle and Cole, then helped Matt to prepare a lasagne and some side salads for dinner that night.

By the time Grant brought Evie home from school. I was feeling calmer, the balance between me and the guys having been restored.

“Livia!!” Evie squealed the second she saw me. I tried hard not to flinch at the high pitched sound, and instead smile for her as she ran at me. I dropped down and opened my arms, bracing for impact. She hit me hard, but I managed to remain upright as I wrapped my arms around her. “I missed you!” she cried as her arms snaked around my neck tight.

“Missed you more sweetie. Did you have a good day?”

“Uh-huh.” She nodded. “Are you better? Can you play with me?”

“Maybe later, Munchkin. You have to run and change for dance class.” Grant said before I could reply.

“Can you take me to dance class Livia?” She asked hopefully.

“I would, but I can’t drive yet.”

“Olivia can come along and watch you another time. She needs to stay home today after last night. She still needs to rest.” Grant added.

“Ok, cool. I can’t wait for you to see my ballet.” Evie cried, then she turned and ran toward her room.

I stood up carefully, still feeling pretty stiff and achy, and found Grant watching me with concern.

“How are you feeling?” He asked.

“I’m good. Just a little achy, like Xander said I would be.”

“Good. I know the guys will have been lecturing you all day, so I won’t add to it again. I just want you to know you are a part of this family Olivia. We all care for you very much and you scared us all last night when we thought we could have lost you. Please sweetheart, never do that again. If you need anything, including time alone, all you have to do is ask.”

“I know. Thank you. I’m so sorry about yesterday. I never intended to cause a fuss. It was all just too much to handle for me and I ran. It won’t happen again.”

“Glad to hear it. Where are the guys?”

“In the kitchen, eating as usual.” I laughed. Those guys had bottomless stomachs.

“You do surprise me.” Grant laughed as he beckoned for me to follow him through to the kitchen.

Matt was at the stove, placing the huge lasagne we made earlier into the oven when we walked in, and Kyle and Cole were sat at the island, eating cookies and playing on their cellphones.

They all looked up as we entered and I rounded the counter to sit beside Cole at the island. It felt more comfortable than standing with Grant. Not that I didn't like him. He had been nothing but good to me, but he just didn't make me feel as at ease as the guys did.

"Hey Dad." Kyle greeted, his mouth full with cookies.

"Hi guys. Everything been ok today?" He had come to lean on the counter and was leant casually with his arms folded over his wide chest.

"Yeah, fine. Why?" Cole asked. He looked at me as he spoke, then handed me a cookie with a sweet smile. He really was such a sweet, thoughtful guy.

"The press have worked out Olivia is living here. There are already stories on the news and in the papers and there's a mob of reporters and photographers outside the gates."

"Fuck! How did they get that information?" Kyle cursed.

"One of them likely recognised Kade the other day. He's been in the news for a few of his big cases. It wouldn't take long to work the rest out after they had his name."

"W-what do they want?" I asked shakily. I hated all of this. I didn't want people to know what happened to me. I just wanted to be able to move on with my life.

"A happy ending. Your kidnaping was big news Olivia. You returning after so many years is a big story." Grant explained.

"I can't." I whispered, already emotional. "I can't talk to them. They'll want to know.....details.....they'll want details and I....." Breaths were getting shorter and shorter and harder to find and I felt too hot all of a sudden.

"Hey, hey! Livy, look at me." Matt demanded as he suddenly appeared before me. He was crouched down, his eyes level with mine. "You do not have to speak to anyone about anything. Everything will be alright. Just breathe *Carina*. Big deep breaths for me now." He said calmly.

“He’s right, Beautiful. You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to. We’re here. We’ve all got you.” Cole agreed and I felt his warm hand rubbing up and down my back soothingly. I reached around on my left side until I got ahold of the bottom of Cole’s henley, then I clung to it tightly as I started into Matt’s deep eyes and tried to calm down.

Matt stayed right with me until my breathing was back to a more normal rate, then he stepped back just a little, staying close. I was still clinging to Cole, not ready to let go yet.

“I don’t want you to worry about this Olivia. We will handle it. Kyle already has security, from the company he works for, outside, in preparation for this, and they will prevent anyone from getting onto the property. You are completely safe in the back gardens, they are secure and very private. Maybe just avoid leaving the house until things settle down, ok?”

“Ok..... Thank you, a-and thank you too Kyle.” I whispered, once again worn out mentally.

“Like Cole said, we got you.” Kyle replied and I smiled, so grateful to have all of them on my side.

“I’m ready Daddy!” Evie declared loudly as she twirled into the kitchen in a pink leotard and tutu. Covered over with a red hooded jacket.

“Excellent. Good job Honey.” Grant beamed at her and I knew he must be proud. She was such a beautiful, smart little thing. “Let’s get going.”

We all said goodbye, smiling brightly for Evie, but as soon as she was gone, I couldn’t smile anymore. Since I escaped things just seemed to be getting harder and harder, and this, the press wanting a piece of me that I simply I didn’t have left to give, it was just too much.

“Liv, talk to us Princess.” Kyle asked. I turned around in the chair so I could see all of them, the whole time still clinging to Cole’s shirt.

“It’s just too much. Why can’t they see after eight years held by some sick monster, I just need time and space to try and fix

what's left of me? Why can't they just leave me alone? I don't h-have anything left to give them!" I cried, the end coming out between blubbering sobs.

"Dad was right. You don't need to be worrying about them. We will handle this. Dad will find a way to get them away from our house, and to keep them from hounding you. You're still underage so there will be laws against them harassing you. He meant it when he said he would handle it, and until he does you're safe. Kyle has extra security here and we will all keep you safe." Matt explained calmly as Cole and Kyle both grabbed and held one of my hands each.

"But Grant said it's on the news. Wh-what if.....do you think *he* will see it and come for me?" I asked, my entire body quaking at the thought of ever having to be near The Shadow ever again.

"Doesn't matter. He will never get near you again Liv. The guys outside are aware of the situation and are very good at their jobs. I'm staying here with you too until that monster has been caught. I already cleared the time off with my boss. Even Kade has cut back to make sure he's here every night with us. We will keep you safe, always." Kyle said firmly and I felt overwhelmed they would alter their lives so much just for me.

"Thank you.....all of you. I don't know how I'd have gotten through the last week without all of you." I said emotionally.

"We're not going anywhere Brains. You're stuck with the lot of us now." Cole laughed as he released my hand and instead pulled me in for a half hug. I let my head relax against his chest and just allowed myself a minute to feel safe in his hold.

A week had passed since the day the press had arrived outside the house, and since then things had settled down a lot.

Grant, as he promised he would, did his legal magic and somehow had the front of the house cleared of all reporters and photographers within twenty-four hours.

I was getting a ton of phone calls about doing interviews and giving a statement about my abduction, but the guys were screening all of those for me, not even allowing me to answer the phone any more. Luckily my cell number seemed to have remained private, so I could still use that.

I had considered just making a short statement, even talked it over with Keira. I was hoping maybe if I gave them something I would be left alone, but then the ridiculous stories had hit the newspapers and I had decided to just stay out of it. The papers had printed photos of the guys getting me to the car that day, outside the restaurant, and reported that I was in a relationship with all four of them. There were suggestions the guys had whisked me away after I had been found and preyed on me because I wasn't mentally competent, after being held captive for so long. They started digging into the guys, reporting them as trouble making kids with questionable pasts. I knew there was more, but after two days of that crap, the guys had stopped the papers from coming to the house, hating how upset it was all making me. It was the four of them I was upset for really though, their whole lives were being torn to shreds in the papers because they tried to be good to me, and I hated it.

Aside from all of that drama, things in the house were going well. I had started my online classes and was relieved to find I could follow most of the curriculum pretty well. Maths was a cinch, laughable really that I even had to complete it, but the other subjects required more study for me. I enjoyed it though, the challenge of the assignments and the vast amounts of reading. It had been so long since I had something like that,

something so focussed to work on. I needed it. It helped me take my mind away from the memories and darkness that fought for attention at every moment,

I was getting better, very slowly. Loud noises were still an issue, but I was learning to deal with Evie shouting and screaming around the place. My anxiety had become less with the guys around and I became better able to push through flashbacks and take control before panic took a firm hold. Nightmares were still an issue, some nights worse than others, but sleep was still not my friend, and I doubted it ever would be again.

The guys continued to be with me at night, taking it in turns, even Xander coming over one night to be with me and it did help, having them there when the nightmares struck. They were great at calming me and bringing me back to reality gently, but they couldn't stop the nightmares, no one could. Every night, every time I allowed sleep to pull me under deep enough, there *he* would be, The Shadow, just waiting with that sneer on his face, ready to tear me apart again and again.

“Hey you. You ok?” I looked up from where I was laid out on the sectional in the media room. It was just after lunch and I had done all of my school work for the day and been fed way too much by Matt, as usual. I knew he wanted me to gain some weight, since I was still sickly looking and way too thin, but eating still proved a struggle for me, and if I forced more than was comfortable, I usually ended up with bad stomach pain.

That was my issue that afternoon. Matt had insisted I least finish half of the turkey sub he made me, which I had done, not wanting him to worry, but now I felt bad for it. My stomach was bloated and painful, hence why I had gone to lie down in privacy for a while.

Kade was walking into the room, a gentle smile on his handsome face. I hadn't seen as much of him as I would have liked over the last week. He had been working like crazy on the killer he was chasing, and on my kidnapper. As promised he had been home every night, but he usually worked in his

room until the small hours and I knew he was worn out. Still, even with shadows beneath his eyes and a little paler than usual, he looked damn good.

“Yeah. I just needed a lie down.” I sighed as I forced myself to sit up enough to look at him properly. I sat with my back against the armrest and pulled my knees up to my chest, trying to alleviate the stomach ache. “What are you doing home?”

“I’ve hit more dead ends and it was driving me crazy. My chief sent me home, sick of hearing me grumbling, I guess.”

“Well I’m glad you’re home. You work too hard.” I smiled, as he sat on the sofa beside my feet and sighed deeply.

“It has been a crazy few weeks.” He agreed.

“Did you eat? I could make you a sandwich or something?” I offered, wanting to do something for him, seeing as most of the crazy he spoke about was down to me and my mess.

“Nah, I’m good, Love, but thank you. Actually I came to see if you were doing anything this afternoon. I want to get out of the city and take a breather. Thought you might want to join me?”

“Where to?” I asked unsure. I hadn’t left the house once since the incident in the restaurant over a week ago. I was too scared of reporters seeing me again.

“Somewhere quiet and peaceful where no one will bother us. Promise. It will just be the two of us and some beautiful views.” He explained and I had to admit, it sounded ideal. It would be good to get out of the house. I was going a little stir crazy there.

“Yeah, ok. That sounds great.” I agreed.

“Yeah? Good. You’ll need to change into warmer clothes though.”

“Ok. When do you want to go?” I turned in the seat and dropped my feet to the ground, ready to move.

“You go and get changed. I’ll grab some water and supplies and meet you out front in say . . . ten minutes? That ok?”

“Ten minutes.” I agreed with a nod, then I jumped up and hurried off, excited to get out for a while.

“Oh my goodness Kade! This is amazing!” I gasped just over two hours later. We had driven about an hour out of the city and ended up parked up at the beginning of numerous trails leading into a huge national park.

As soon as we climbed out of his SUV, Kade had handed me an extra sweater, to wear over the one I already had on, then coat, hat and gloves as he pulled on much the same, along with a backpack filled with who knew what?

We had quite a hike then, one I had not been expecting and was totally not fit enough for. Kade had been patient, allowing me to stop often and plying me with water. It really hadn’t been that far, but I was just so damned weak, and lacking so much muscle. I had no idea how I ever walked as far as I did the day I escaped, because the forty minute hike with Kade almost finished me off.

I didn’t complain though, because it was good to be out, even though it was pretty damn cold that day. The trees all around us were bare and leaves crunched under foot. The sun shining down felt warming and empowering. It all just reminded me how lucky I was to be free and I liked that feeling.

Now we were at the top, having reached the most amazing look out point. I stood close to the edge, just in awe of the beauty all around me. I could see over the valley for what felt like miles, and all there was to see was nature, amazing wonderful nature. Trees stretched out as far as the eye could see, and there was a deep valley leading down to a beautiful body of water, off which the bright sun was reflecting. A group of birds, all flying in some formation flew past at that exact moment, as if it had been planned and it was just bliss, peaceful, wonderful bliss.

“I know. Pretty cool huh?” Kade agreed and he stepped up beside me. “I love it out here.”

“It’s just so beautiful.” I couldn’t take my eyes from the vista before me. I was transfixed by the perfection of it all. Tears filled my eyes as I realised how close I had come to never being able to see any of what lay before me, or anything but that damned room, ever again. I still had no memory of how I escaped, but I knew I was damned lucky I had. It could all have ended so differently. There was no way, without whatever miracle happened, I would have ever left that cabin alive.

“Hey,” Kade whispered when he saw the first tears fall. In an instant I was pulled into his front, wrapped in his huge arms. “What’s wrong? I didn’t want to upset you.”

“You didn’t.” I whimpered. “I just....I was realising how lucky I am that I get to see this, to see anything. It could have ended so differently Kade.”

“I just thank the powers that be, that it didn’t, and that I get to be here with you right now.” He sighed as he pulled me against his hard body even tighter.

“Me too.”

“I will catch him, Livy. I promise you, he will never touch you ever again.”

“I know. I won’t let that happen either.” I said firmly. “I was a kid when he took me before, too scared to fight back or protect myself. Now I know I’m not that kid anymore. I’m stronger and I know I’d die before I ever let that monster touch me again.” I had been thinking about it a lot recently. I had been questioning over and over if there was more I could have done, had I not let fear rule me, if there had been opportunities to escape sooner and I knew there had been. He had become complacent, since I did as he said for the most part, and I could have taken my opportunity much earlier. I hadn’t because I had been so damned scared of The Shadow, so scared of what he would do to me if I failed to get away. I

never once stopped to consider all I would gain if I did get away, how very much it was worth the risk, if it resulted in getting out.

“It will never come to that, but I’m glad you’re starting to see how strong you are.” He ran a hand down my back soothingly and I had the thought that I could happily spend the rest of my days in that beautiful place, safe in his arms.

We stayed like that for a while, him just holding me like he too never wanted the moment to end. Then, when I thought it couldn’t be any more perfect, huge white snowflakes began to flutter down on us and the whole thing became completely magical, like some fairytale my Mom read me as a little girl.

“It’s snowing!” I cried excitedly as I moved my hand from Kade’s waist and held it out to catch the huge flakes.

“Yeah, I noticed. It wasn’t forecast though. I wouldn’t have brought you out here if I knew.”

“Why not?” I stepped back and looked out over the view again. “Look, it’s so beautiful.” I gasped as I saw the trees already gathering glistening snow, the flakes catching on the bare tree branches and laying across the land, blanketing it in sparkling white.

“I know Love, It really is and I hate to drag you away, but this snow is coming thick and fast. We need to get back to the car before we get trapped.”

“Oh.” I instantly realised why he was worried. It had taken us forty minutes to hike up there and in just the last few minutes, there was already a heavy covering of snow around us.

“It’s ok. We’ll get back. My car is all terrain. We just need to get back to it, ok?”

“Ok. Yeah, I can do that.” I agreed, feigning confidence. Kade smiled and nodded, but I could see the worry in his face.

“Come on Love, we better go.” He held out his hand and I took it gratefully, needing the comfort to ease the panic beginning to build in me. I couldn’t shake thoughts of us

getting stranded in the snowstorm which was rapidly picking up speed around us.

“Will you bring me back? I love it here.” I was reluctant to leave the beauty of it all, but I knew we had to go.

“With pleasure. When it’s warmer we could even come and camp up here.”

He started down the trail and I quickly realised it was not going to be an easy hike back. The paths were rough and steep, and now covered with snow, making them very slippery.

By the time we were about halfway I had slipped a half dozen times, luckily Kade catching me quickly each time. He too had lost his footing a couple of times. We were in the wrong shoes, Kade in sneakers and me in fashion boots with thin soles. My feet were numb from the cold, but I pushed the thought back, not wanting to worry Kade more. He was already stressed, the snow building quickly, already deep enough to cover my feet entirely, and up to my knees in some places, and still falling heavily.

We were at the steepest point and I was terrified of falling, seeing the drop to our right down a deathly steep banking, but I tried to just focus on each step instead of allowing panic to take over. I kept on telling myself how much I loved snow, like it would make me enjoy the terrifying experience. The snow was just coming down so fast and thick, I could barely see a foot in front of my face.

Once again my foot slipped out from beneath me, my boots just not having enough tread to combat the slickness. I squealed as I went down, that time Kade not fast enough to grab me. I landed hard on my butt, but Kade steadied me from going any further, thankfully.

“Shit! Are you ok?” He asked.

“Might have bruised my butt, but I’ll live.” I smiled to reassure him, then took his hand as he helped me up.

“I’m so sorry. I never would have brought you out here if I knew this would happen.”

“I’m good. It’s an adventure!” I declared, trying to keep it light. He was worrying too much. We’d get to the car, I knew we would, and if the car was stuck. We’d have to spend the night in it. So what? I’d spent 2928 nights in a much worse place.

“You won’t be saying that when we have to spend the night freezing in my bloody car.” He grumbled, and I smiled as the English in him, peeked out even more during his rant.

“One cold night in a luxury SUV will not kill me, after the place I lived for the last eight years. As long as you’re with me, I’ll be fine Kade.” I said confidently, needing him to stop stressing himself out.

“God, do you have to be so positive? You’re making me look bad.” He grouched as he pulled me close and started down again.

“I’m in a beautiful place, on a beautiful snowy day, with a very kind, if a little grumpy, guy. How can I not be positive?”

“Even though your butt hurts?” He asked, then grinned.

“Even though my butt kills.” I agreed with a laugh back.

“Ok fine. I’ll try to be less grumpy, but we need to move. I’m not spending the night out here. We have to get back to the car.”

“Agreed.” I nodded, then pulled away from his hold and took his hand instead. “We can’t move quickly enough, pressed together like that. I’ll be fine.” I told him when he looked back to me with concern.

“Just watch your step. If I didn’t keep fucking slipping too, I’d just carry you, but I won’t risk falling with you in my arms.”

“I’m good Kade. I can walk.” He nodded and dropped below me on the incline. There he waited and held onto me as I followed and that’s how we worked our way down for the next ten minutes, mostly in silence, the only sound the ever increasing winds whipping around us.

It was definitely getting colder, my hands becoming painful, the wool gloves I wore soaked from me falling in the snow so many times, and my feet painfully numb. Luckily my coat was thick, the guys having helped me pick an appropriate one for the blizzards in Chicago, when they took me shopping, but the rest of me not under it was freezing.

We were almost to the car, but first was the hardest part of the whole trail. It was a steep decline, made up of hugely tall concrete steps. I had struggled up them enough earlier, in the bright sunlight and no snow. Now it was pretty dark and the steps were completely blanketed in snow deep enough to reach my thighs! The snow had just come so fast, like the heavens had used a dump truck to just throw it down on us, and there was no sign of it slowing. It was whipping down violently, the soft flakes that had started it all, gone, and replaced with sharp, icy flakes that felt like they were cutting into my face every time they hit me.

“Fuck! This is bad.” Kade cursed as he stood at the top, assessing the steps. I remembered how uneven they were, some wide, some narrow. How would we even know where the steps were under the snow?

“I’ll go first. Just try to step where I do, ok?” Kade instructed and I nodded. Because he was so much taller, the snow was only just over his knees, but still, it was going to be hard getting down this section and I was worried about falling and making more stress for Kade to deal with.

He tentatively dropped down the first step, then held his hand out to me. I stepped into his deep imprints following carefully and we made it down the first three, but as Kade stepped down to the fourth, his hand ripped from mine and before I could react, he fell crying out as he went down. He landed hard, with a sickening crack, then he rolled down the remainder of the hill at speed, landing about ten feet below me in a pile, unmoving, the snow around his head staining red.

“KADE!” I cried as I stood frozen, desperate to see him move. When after a minute he hadn’t moved at all I just started

running to him. Luckily he had cleared the snow from parts of the steps as he went and I was able to see enough to jump down. After two steps, I slipped, landing on my butt, but I didn't stop to get up. I just shuffled down the huge steps, my body rattling with each drop until finally I reached the bottom, and Kade.

He lay on his side, his arm tossed out in front of him. He was covered in powdery snow and blood was oozing from a cut on the back of his head, far too quickly. I knew I needed to stop the bleeding, so I stood and frenziedly unzipped and removed my coat. I pulled off the spare sweater Kade gave me earlier. Completely frozen, I hurried to pull my coat back on, then lifted Kade's head enough to press the sweater to the large, deep cut he must have gotten hitting his head on one of the concrete steps.

"Kade?" I cried. "Kade? Wake up! Please just wake up!" But he didn't respond. He was breathing, but his eyes were closed and he was too still. I knew it was bad. He could have a brain bleed, he could be dying. I needed to do something!

My first thought was to get help, and I pulled out my cell, but the calls wouldn't connect and I remembered Grant telling me you had to have coverage to make a call. I tried pulling Kade's cell from his pocket too, but it wouldn't work either. By the time I gave up, shoving both cells into my pocket I was sobbing and begging Kade to just open his eyes and tell me what to do.

When it became clear Kade wasn't going to wake up, I knew I had to get him to the car before he froze, before we both did. It was too cold to be out and not moving and the snow was coming down so fast, it was settling on Kade's still form.

We were only about twenty metres from the parking lot where the car was, but I knew it was going to be a long way to drag a man twice, maybe even three times my size and weight, especially as pathetic as I was.

I tied the sweater around Kade's head so it stayed tight against the wound, then grabbed the shoulders of his coat, his actual

shoulders too wide for me to grip. It would be easier to drag him by his feet, but I needed to protect his head, so I started heaving, dragging him a tiny amount at a time, keeping his head raised from the ground as much as I could. Each time I pulled, he moved maybe a centimetre and it took everything in me to do that, but I knew I had to get him out of the cold before I could do anything else.

It seemed like hours before I finally got him to the car and by that time I was shaking so bad I could barely hold myself up, but we made it. We got to the car.

I started looking in Kade's pockets for the keys, trying not to look at the stillness and pale colour of his face. It scared me too much and I didn't have time to be scared. Kade needed me to keep it together.

I found the car keys in his jeans pocket and pressed the fob to unlock it, then opened the passenger side door and almost cried again. I had no idea how I was going to get him into the seat. It was so high that it had been an effort just for me to climb up each time. That was hard enough. How was I going to get Kade up there?"

"Kade? It'd be really good if you just opened your eyes now please?" I whimpered as I looked over at him, laid so still on the ground at my feet.

"No? Ok fine, but I am warning you, this will not be fun or pretty." I joked through my tears, just trying to keep it together.

I put a foot either side of his wide chest and crouched down, then heaved his heavy arms one on each of my shoulders. Just lifting his arms was a fight, they were so heavy. I used every ounce of strength, resolve and adrenaline in me, and heaved his top half up onto my back, his weight almost toppling me over, but I fought to stay upright, knowing I would never have the energy to get him up again if I dropped him.

Just as I started to panic that there was no way I would get him in the car, he groaned and I felt his hands move a little. My

instinct was to drop him and check on him, but I was so close to getting him in the car, and if he was even a little awake, he could help.

“Kade!” I cried, my voice hoarse from all of the exertion. He groaned again and tears of relief ran down my face, thinking he must be coming around. “Kade, you have to help me. Can you stand for me?”

“Livy?” The word was slurred and quiet, but I heard it.

“Yeah, I’m here Kade and I really need to get you in the car before I pass out. You’re kinda heavy you know?” My voice was strained, my legs trembling like jello, and my chest tight with the effort it was taking to hold half of his weight against my back.

He groaned again, but this time he moved his legs, his feet struggling to move beneath him. I looked down, and as soon as I saw he had his feet flat I started standing, trying to pull him up as he too lifted his weight. I forced my shaking legs to stand and together we got Kade upright. Feeling him folding behind me again, I shoved back as fast as I could, before I dropped him, or his weight pulled me over. I felt his shoulders land on the seat and I turned hurriedly to hold him there before he slid back off.

“Kade?” I called, but he seemed to be completely unconscious again.

It took me forever to push his butt up into the seat, then lift each of his legs into the car too, but finally I got him in, laid across the two front seats, blood still staining the sweater tied tight around his head.

I hurried to climb in the driver’s seat and cradled his head on my lap, pressing harder over the bleeding wound as I just took a moment to breathe, and cry a little. Every part of me hurt with the cold and exertion, but I didn’t have time to think too much about it. I knew I needed to just keep on going.

“Kade?” I whimpered, but he was back to laying completely motionless, his breathing the only thing reassuring me he was

still alive.

I looked down at the steering wheel. I had never driven before, not really. When I was a kid I'd sat in the driver's seat and started the engine a few times when my dad let me, and I knew how it all worked in theory, but I had no experience and very little idea in practise.

Deciding it was our best option, I pressed the ignition I had seen Kade press earlier and the car came to life.

I had to move the seat as far forward as it would go, and even still my toes barely touched the pedals. I took a deep breath, knowing this was stupid. I couldn't just start a car and suddenly drive because I needed to, but I had to try. I was smart. I was sure I could work it out.

I flicked it into 'D' which I guessed meant drive, and pressed one of the pedals. When we didn't move I tried the other and we lurched forward. Panicked, I took my hands and feet off of everything, and looked to Kade. He had fallen forward and I hurried to push him back, then fastened him in to be safe, with the seatbelt. I also hurriedly put my own belt on, then decided I had to try again. My only option was to leave Kade in the freezing car and walk to the highway, but I was weak, very weak and I really wasn't sure I'd make it. Also, I couldn't bear to leave Kade alone, freezing and bleeding. No, driving was our only option. I pressed the pedal again, this time gentler and we started to creep forward.

"Ok, good, this is good." I told myself, trying to keep calm. I looked around for the exit to the road we drove in on, but it was really dark out now.

"Lights? I need lights." I told myself, then I started messing with the controls until the lights shone brightly ahead of me. I saw an exit sign and carefully turned the wheel, not knowing how much I would need to turn it to move the right amount. I worked the steering out pretty quickly, and very slowly crept out of the carpark and onto what I hoped was the road we came in on. It was covered with snow, so I wasn't entirely sure, just hopeful.

I was moving really slowly, conscious of the slick surface beneath the tires and my 'no clue' driving status.

It took me about ten minutes of very cautious movement to reach the exit onto the highway and I realised I likely could have walked quicker, if I had any energy left in my body, which I didn't.

I stopped at the exit and pulled out the cell phones, hoping like hell the little signal bars would show something, but they didn't, not yet.

Terrified, I turned onto the deserted highway and tried to step up the speed a little, knowing time was of the essence if Kade was badly injured. Luckily I remembered the way we had arrived that afternoon, and tried to travel the same way back. It was hard to be sure I was going the right way since the falling snow was heavy, making visibility low, and everything was now white and covered.

I kept my speed moderate, under 30KMPH, too afraid to go faster in case we fishtailed and ended up a lot worse off.

It was about twenty minutes before I started seeing other cars on the road. Nervous I was endangering them, I pulled over in a layby and pulled out the cell phones again to check coverage, but before I could look, Kade's started vibrating in my hand.

I dropped mine in my lap and hurried to answer it while I could, seeing as I did, that it was Grant calling.

"Kade, thank God! Where are you?" He asked urgently.

"Grant? Grant, it's Olivia." I cried, overcome with relief and emotion. I likely sounded hysterical to poor Grant.

"Olivia, sweetheart. Where are you? Where's Kade?"

"He fell, Grant, and he's bleeding badly. He's out and I...I can't wake him. I got him to the car, but I can't drive and I'm scared. He needs help!" I sobbed all at once.

"Just breathe, everything will be ok. Where is Kade hurt?" He asked calmly.

“H-his head. I tried to stop the bleeding, but I can’t....it won’t stop.”

“Where are you right now?”

“On the highway. I tried....to drive, but I don’t think I’m very good a-and there’s so much snow. I pulled over.”

“Good, that’s good. You need to stay where you are and just press something to Kade’s head for me. Kyle’s tracking your cell, we’re on our way.”

“Ok.” I whimpered. “Please hurry.”

I didn’t even finish the words before Kade’s cell beeped, then shut off, the battery obviously dead from him constantly trying to call someone on our way down the trail. I picked up my cell to try and call Grant back, but there wasn’t enough coverage to connect the call and I just cried as I pulled Kade’s head further into my lap and readjusted the blood soaked sweater against his wound.

“Kade, please..... please wake up now.” I whimpered, but he didn’t move at all. I was terrified, sure he should have come around more by now if it was nothing serious. I started to panic that I had done the wrong thing in moving him. What if I had rattled him too much, and made things worse?

“Just d-don’t die, please Kade? I only just found you. I need you. I c-can’t.....can’t deal with losing anyone else.”

The temperature in the car dropped as we just sat there waiting, and Kade became freezing in my arms. Scared hypothermia would set in with his body so still I shucked off my coat and wrapped it as tightly around his body as I could, making sure his cold hands were tucked into it too. Him being so much bigger, it only just covered his front, but I decided it would be better than nothing.

I was freezing, but I was conscious enough to keep myself warm. I’d be ok. I was terrified Kade wouldn’t.

After about thirty minutes I saw lights shine in behind us and when I turned I saw Grant jump out of the driver’s side and

come running over. There was no mistaking it was him, even in the dark. There weren't many men with his huge build, except his sons of course, three of whom came running behind him. The driver and passenger door of the car were thrown open in sync and Cole leant into the passenger side, glancing over me and then to Kade.

"He's still bleeding. It just won't stop." I cried, terrified.

"He's going to be ok sweetheart. Come out and let Kyle check you over while I take a look at Kade." Grant instructed and I shakily nodded. Cole had climbed into the backseat now, and he lifted Kade's head from my lap and held him still while I slid out of the car and Grant took my place.

Kyle stood just behind me once I was out in the freezing night air and as soon as I saw him I crumbled.

"Kyle!" I cried, and then I was in his arms, his heat encircling me and warming my shivering body. "He was bleeding so much and I didn't know what to do." I sobbed. Warm fabric covered my shoulders and I turned to see Matt putting his coat over me carefully.

"He'll be fine. He's tough and he's got a thick skull." Kyle tried to joke, but it didn't work. Since we were all terrified.

"He's lost so much blood."

"Are you hurt?" Kyle asked. I shook my head, then just buried my face in his coat and sobbed, terrified for Kade and more exhausted than I had ever been.

"Kyle! Get her in the car and meet us at Chicago Gen!" I heard Grant yell, then I heard Kyle catch a set of keys Grant must have thrown.

Matt took me from Kyle then, gathering me into his arms and carrying me to Grant's Range Rover. I was a little out of it on the drive to the city, completely devoid of any strength and energy and in shock at everything that happened. I just knew Matt held me in the back, while Kyle drove.

“*Carina?* We’re at the hospital. My Dad just text to say they’re here already. Kade is being checked over and Dad wants you to be checked over too, ok?”

“Is Kade ok?” I asked, suddenly snapping back to reality.

“We don’t know yet, Princess. Let’s get in and find out, ok?” Kyle said, turning to look at me from the front. I nodded and moved to stand, but my legs were exhausted and wouldn’t even try to lift me.

“What’s wrong?” Matt asked.

“I’m just tired. I had to move Kade pretty far and then get him into the car....it was hard, really hard.” I whispered.

“You lifted Kade into his car?” Kyle asked as he just stared at me incredulously.

“He came around enough to help some. I shouldn’t have moved him though. I wasn’t thinking. I just worried he would freeze out there.” I whispered.

“You’re fucking amazing.” Matt whispered as he kissed my forehead gently, but I didn’t feel amazing, I would never forgive myself if Kade didn’t come out of this.

Kyle lifted me from the back of the car and carried me into the hospital. I felt pathetic being carried, but I knew I was too weak and exhausted to make my legs work.

Matt followed and we all headed into a small waiting room where Grant and Cole were sat anxiously fidgeting.

“Olivia!” Cole gasped as we walked in. He leapt up and hurried to me. “Are you ok?”

“Is Kade? Where is he? What’s happening?” I asked.

“Xander is with him while he gets checked over. He’ll need a CAT scan, but the doctors weren’t too worried. They said head wounds always bleed a lot.” Grant explained.

“Can’t we see him?” I was tearing up again, just desperate to see him and know he was alright.

“Not yet, Beautiful. Xander will tell us as soon as they know anything.” Cole said with a half smile. “Come sit down with me.” He held out his arms and Kyle handed me over. I clung to his wide neck as he carried me to a seat and sat, settling me on his lap. I just relaxed against him, needing his warmth against my chilled body, and his safety surrounding me.

“What happened Liv?” Kyle asked as he and Matt sat opposite me, beside Grant.

“We were at a pretty high lookout point when the snow started. Kade got us down as fast as he could, but we weren’t dressed for it and I kept on slipping.” I began, my voice flat and exhausted. “We were almost to the car, but there were some huge stone steps. Kade went first and he lost his footing and fell. I th-think he banged his head.....banged it on a step. He rolled a ways, then he was just.....just still.” I fought hard not to sob as I went on. “I got to him, but he wouldn’t wake up. I tried the cell phones, but they wouldn’t work. The car wasn’t far and Kade was getting so cold, so I decided to drag him. It wasn’t far, like twenty feet, but I think.....I think maybe I shouldn’t h-have moved him. Did I make things worse?” I asked tearfully.

“No Liv. You did the right thing getting him out of the cold. I don’t know how the fuck you did it though. One of us would have struggled to get Kade in that car, never mind you.”

“I had to. I couldn’t leave him there while I went who knows how far to get help? Luckily he came around just enough to help me get him in the car and then he was out again. I just started driving. I didn’t exactly know what I was doing, but I worked it out. I drove to the highway, but there was still no cell service. I went further, but then other cars started appearing and I got scared I would cause an accident. I pulled over and that’s when Grant called.”

“You were amazing Olivia. You did so good. Like I told you before, you’re a fucking warrior.” Cole whispered as he held me tighter against him, comforting me.

“I just want Kade to be alright.” I whispered, my voice barely coming out.

“He will be. You’ll see. He’ll be fine.” Cole assured me.

“I’m going to find Xander. See if he’ll look you over. You’re too pale.” Grant said as he stood.

“Don’t, please Grant. Kade needs him now. I’m ok. I just need to get warm and dry and rest for a while.”

“I’ll keep an eye on her Dad.” Cole agreed, much to my relief.

“Fine, but I’ll call Keira and have her bring you a change of clothes when she comes over. She’s just waiting on a babysitter for Evie. She won’t be long.” I nodded, desperate to take off my clothes which were filthy and soaking wet from all of my crawling in the snow, and also covered in Kade’s blood.

“Just close your eyes and rest, Beautiful. I’ll wake you if Mom or Xander come, ok?” Cole offered, and I nodded, barely even able to keep my eyes open. A few minutes rest would do me some good. Give me the energy I needed to be there for Kade when he woke up.

It was Keira’s voice, filled with worry and stress, that awoke me a while later.

“How is he? Have we had an update?” She asked. I opened my eyes and found her hurrying in. She was dressed in leggings and a baggy t-shirt under her coat, so unlike what she usually wore, and it was clear she had been crying.

“No update yet.” Grant sighed as he rushed to her and took her in his arms.

“How’s Olivia?” She asked quietly as they hugged.

“Exhausted and pale, but she doesn’t want to be checked over. She says she’s ok. Cole has her for now.”

“Where did this snow even come from? It wasn’t forecast last night!” Keira cried.

“I know Honey. Just one of those freak weather fronts I think. Kade will be ok. Olivia did well getting him to help. She likely saved his life, and near killed herself doing it.” They obviously thought I was still asleep as they spoke and I felt bad eavesdropping, so I closed my eyes again and settled back into Cole. I was almost back asleep when Cole shook me ever so gently.

“Olivia, Mom’s here. Let’s get you cleaned up and in dry clothes, yeah?” He asked when I opened my eyes and looked up to him. I nodded and he smiled gently as he gathered me closer and stood.

“Here Honey. I brought you the warmest clothes you had.” Keira said as she handed Cole a backpack. “Do you need some help changing?” She offered kindly, but there was no way I was letting her see my scars. It would only upset her and I wouldn’t have that. She was upset enough, worrying about Kade.

“I’ll manage, thank you.” I whispered, smiling to reassure her. Cole carried me into a large disabled restroom beside the waiting room and locked the door, then he put me down on the closed toilet and crouched before me.

“You’re not going to manage Brains.” He said with a comforting smile. As if to illustrate his point, I swayed forward, dizzy from sitting up. He caught me and held me steady.

“Sorry.” I whispered.

“Nothing to be sorry for. I’d be exhausted too if I had to drag Kade’s huge ass anywhere.” He laughed, “I’m going to do this for you ok?” I wanted to protest, to save him from the embarrassment of having to change me, and the horror of seeing my scars, but I didn’t because I knew I was too far gone to take care of myself, and because I knew if any of the guys could handle it all, it was my gentle Cole.

“Ok.” I uttered. “Thank you.”

Cole nodded and set to work removing my sweater first. He tossed it in the trash, then looked in the backpack, pulling out body wash and a washcloth. He kept one hand on me, holding me up while he filled the basin with warm water, then washed the blood from my hands and arms, and streaks I had wiped on my face when wiping away tears.

Next he took off my boots and soaked socks. Then my jeans, until I sat in nothing but my underwear and a camisole.

“This is soaked too, Beautiful. You ok with me taking it off?” He asked as he looked up to me with that gentle smile. He had a hold of the hem of my camisole and I knew it needed to come off. It was soaked and also stained with blood, Kade’s blood.

“Yeah, but.....just brace yourself ok? My scars.....they’re a mess.” I admitted.

“No part of you is a mess Olivia. These scars, they’re just proof of the warrior I know you are.” He whispered as he carefully lifted my camisole and threw it too, into the trash.

I heard his sharp intake of breath when he saw my stomach and the countless marks across it.

“I’m so sorry you had to go through this baby.” He whispered, almost breathlessly. His hand slowly reached out, allowing me time to stop him, but I didn’t. Maybe it was the sincerity in his eyes or the soft tone of his voice when he said he was sorry. Maybe I just needed the contact. Maybe because the way he called me ‘baby’ made my heart stutter. Whatever the reason I just sat and let his fingers run over my abdomen, following the deepest knife lines.

“You are beautiful Olivia Byrd, scars and all. Each one of these marks just reminds me how amazingly strong you are. My warrior.” He whispered. His lips touched my cheek, so gently, and it felt electric. Knowing he saw all of me, scars and all, and still wanted to kiss me, touch me. It meant so much and without overthinking it, I turned and put my lips over his before he pulled away from me. The kiss was brief and

unexpected by both of us, but in the few seconds our lips touched something passed between us, something special.

“Sorry.” I whispered as I pulled away, realising what I had done. Just because he still accepted me, didn’t mean I could attack him. He wouldn’t be interested in me that way. He was this amazing, handsome guy and I was messed up, as messed up as people came. I didn’t even know if I wanted a relationship. Certainly if I had one, It couldn’t be normal, not after what I had been through. There was no way I could have sex, that was for sure. I was too damaged, too traumatised by The Shadow to let anyone touch me that way. I’d messed up kissing him and I knew it.

“No, it was my fault. I’m sorry.” Cole said quickly. “Let’s just get you changed ok?” When I dared to look up his smile was back in place and I decided if he could drop it, so could I.

He helped me into the jeans and hooded sweater Keira had packed for me, then I ran a brush through my matted hair and tied it back up. Cole put dry socks on my frozen feet and changed my soaked boots for dry Chucks.

I definitely felt better when we were done, but still frozen through, my teeth chattering. I wasn’t sure I would ever be warm again. The cold that had penetrated my bones was the cold that I knew so well, from The Darkness and I hated it. It had been reawoken within me that night and I didn’t think I would ever be able to get warm again.

Cole wrapped his arm around me and helped me shakily walk back to the waiting room. He led me into the seat between Kyle and Matt,

“Rest. I’ll get you some hot chocolate to warm you up. Ok?” He said softly and I nodded gratefully. Kyle took my hand, then sat forward and studied me hard.

“You’re freezing?” He said.

“I’m okay. I’ll warm up.” I told him through chattering teeth. He stood and pulled off his coat, then the sweater he wore over a henley. He gathered it up and slipped it over my head.

Pulling my arms though as if I were a child. Still, I wasn't complaining. I was too cold and tired to do that, and too grateful for the extra layer.

He wrapped his coat around my front like a blanket and wrapped an arm around my shoulders, pulling me into him and holding me close to his warm side.

"There's no update yet *Carina*. You should rest for now." Matt soothed as his hand took mine and held it tightly. I wanted to rest, really badly. I was exhausted and fighting just to keep my eyes open, but I couldn't. It had been too long. What was going on? I was so worried something bad had happened to Kade, and I needed to be awake so I could know as soon as there was news. More than anything I needed to know Kade was going to be ok.

Cole returned a few minutes later with a vending machine hot chocolate, which I took a few sips of to warm me up, but it started to turn my anxious stomach and I left most of it and just snuggled against Kyle instead.

We were all quiet as the hours passed. The guys were desperate for me to rest, but I couldn't. I was too worried. It was taking too damned long for news. I was sure I had done something to hurt Kade and make things worse when I moved him.

Finally, over four hours after we arrived at the hospital and late into the night, the door to the waiting room opened and Xander walked in looking exhausted.

"Son! Please tell me he's ok?" Grant leapt to his feet as he spoke. Keira standing with him. I stood too, Kyle steadying me when I wobbled a little, then leading me over with the others.

"He's ok." Xander said with a nod. "He was causing us some worry at first, not waking up, but he came around about an hour ago and he's fully responsive. The CAT scan was all good too. He has a nasty gash on his head, now closed with

staples, one hell of a headache and a concussion, but he got off lightly. He'll be fine in a few days.”

“Oh thank God. “ Keira cried, my thoughts exactly.

“Can we see him?” I asked, just needing to see those amber eyes myself to know it was true, that he would be alright.

“Just briefly. Then you're coming with me so I can check you over. You're way too pale and you look exhausted sweetheart.” Xander sighed.

“I am, but I'm ok. I'll get some sleep once I know he's alright.”

“We got her Xand. You look like you need to sleep too.” Kyle told him and he did. He had shadows under his eyes and his hair was wild, his shirt beneath his white coat rumpled.

“Yeah, I was off shift three hours ago.” He agreed.

“Go home. Simon will be worried, and you need rest. I'll call you if anything changes. I'm going to stay with him tonight.” Kyle said.

“Me too.” I agreed.

“No way!” Matt declared

“Not happening.” Cole said at the same time.

“Please, can I just see him?” I pleaded, tears trying to escape once again. I pushed them back, not wanting anyone to see how close I was to breaking down. I just needed to see Kade, alive and moving. He had scared me so badly when he was unconscious.

“Yes, but just three at a time.” Xander said.

“Cole, Matt, you go with Olivia, then you can get her home while we stay with Kade for a while.” Keira suggested.

“Here, take Kade's car home.” Kyle said as he handed Matt the keys. I pulled away from Kyle, wanting them to see I was stronger than I looked. I wasn't, but I could pretend I was. Not showing my fear and weakness had been my own minor

victory in The Darkness and so I had had plenty of practice at it.

“Come on then. I’ll take you to him, then head home.” Xander said as he walked to the door and held it open. I hurried through first, desperate to see Kade, and Cole and Matt followed.

“He’ll need to stay the night for observation because of the severity of his concussion, but if all’s well he’ll be released tomorrow.” Xander explained as we walked down the busy halls.

I was trying to look strong and brave, but I was so completely exhausted, that as soon as strangers started to pass me in the halls, I got panicky and jumpy. I fought to hide it as I darted around trying to avoid being touched, but it obviously failed, because within seconds I was surrounded by Cole and Matt on either side of me, shielding me from anyone touching, or even getting close to me. It was frustrating that they could read me so easily, but I was too grateful for the safety they provided to complain.

“He’s in here.” Xander said as he stopped at a door marked ‘Room 8’. “Don’t stay too long. The others will want to see him and he really needs to rest.”

“We won’t.” Cole agreed. “Get home Bro, and sleep. You look like crap.” He added with a pat on Xander’s shoulder.

Xander just nodded, agreeing. He briefly hugged me and patted Matt on the back, all in silence, then turned and walked away.

Matt opened the door to Kade’s room and motioned for me to go first. I took a tentative step inside, scared of what I would see, scared Kade would still be deathly pale and still, but as soon as I got up the courage to glance at the bed, I relaxed a little. Kade was sat up, dressed in a hospital gown and a bandage around his head, but he had colour and as soon as my eyes met his, he smiled.

“Kade.” I gasped as I hurried forward to his bedside.

“I’m good, Love. Calm down. I’m absolutely fine.” He said calmly, then he reached out and squeezed my hand tight in his.

“I was so sc-scared.” I whimpered as the tears I had been fighting back, burst forth.

“I know. I’m so sorry you had to deal with that. I never should have allowed it to happen.” He said, guilt clouding his face.

“It was an accident, Kade. Don’t be silly, there was n-nothing you could have done to stop it. I was just so w-worried I would lose you.”

“I’m not going anywhere, promise.”

“Xander tell you what happened?” Cole asked as he appeared behind me with a chair. He placed it down and gently pushed me into it. I went willingly, my legs shaking beneath me.

“Not really. I know Olivia called for help somehow.” He smiled across to me gratefully and I nodded. There was nothing I wouldn’t have done to try and save him.

“Yeah, she did, after she dragged your ass back to the car, lifted you into it and drove halfway home to find cell service.”

“Drove, having no clue how to, in a blizzard.” Matt added from where he stood opposite us.

“What? How the hell did you do that. I’m about ten times bigger than you for a start!” Kade gasped as he turned to me.

“Hardly!” I laughed. “You were heavy, but I didn’t have much choice. You woke enough to stand when I was getting you in the car. The place was deserted, and the cells wouldn’t work. I couldn’t just leave you there. It wasn’t as dramatic as they’re making it sound.” I shrugged, not wanting him to be mad at me for doing the wrong thing.

“You’re a friggin crazy woman, you know that, right?” Kade asked, incredulous.

“Yep.” I agreed with a nod. I did know that. I lost my mind sometime in The Darkness and it was never coming back, not fully. That much I had already come to terms with.

“Thankyou Love. What you did for me was amazing. You saved my life.” He added, more gently.

“I didn’t Kade. You guys are all being dramatic now. I just did what needed to be done.....what any of you guys would have done if you were there.”

“Yeah, but we’re all twice your size, at least, and know how to drive.” Matt laughed.

“Are you ok? You weren’t hurt were you?” Kade asked as he started looking me over.

“I’m fine.” Kade, ignoring me, looked over me to Cole for an answer.

“She was just shaken up and exhausted. We’re getting her home after this.” Cole replied.

“Kyle said he’s staying with you. I want to stay too. You scared me, I’m not ready to leave you.” I argued, trying hard to fight yet more tears. Kade took my hand again and pulled me up. I went willingly and laid on the bed beside him when he pulled me down. I lay my head on his chest and just took a breath.

“I’m going to be just fine, Love. I’ll be home tomorrow and back to normal. You need to take care of yourself. You’re pale and you’re trembling badly. You don’t want to end up sick because of this.” He said as he stroked up and down my back soothingly. I squeezed around his waist, wanting more than anything to stay with him. “I need you to go home with the guys and rest, ok? I need to know my idiocy hasn’t hurt you too.” He sighed and I knew, from the tone of his voice he felt guilty about what had happened, even though it wasn’t at all his fault.

“Ok,” I agreed, knowing he needed me to give in on this one. If I was honest I knew I would struggle to keep on going much longer anyway. They were right, I was exhausted, more so than I ever remembered being.

“Good. Thankyou Olivia.” He whispered and I felt him place a kiss on top of my head, very gently.

“Thank you for not dying.” I whispered back, so grateful to have him safe beside me. My feelings for him, for all of the guys were confusing and at times, overwhelming. I was struggling to understand the way I felt for them all, especially after I kissed Cole earlier, but one thing I knew for sure was that I cared for each and every one of them very much, and I needed them all more than anything else at that time. I would never have survived losing Kade that day.

“I’m not going anywhere Love.” The arm around my waist squeezed me tightly against Kade’s body, as if he too was reluctant to let me go.

“Come on *Carina*. Let’s get you home and into bed.” Matt interrupted.

“Go on Love, get home and sleep.” Kade agreed as he released his hold enough for me to turn and get my feet back on the floor. “I’ll be home in the morning.”

I pushed up from the bed, Kade’s arm still loosely around my waist, steadying me. I was even more shaky by now and as soon as I got fully up, I felt lightheaded. I swayed and slammed my eyes closed in an attempt to stop the room around me from spinning.

Hands grabbed me, two on my waist and two on the tops of my arms. I knew Cole was behind me, holding my arms by his aftershave which I knew well now, a mix of sweet and spicy. When I dared to open my eyes I found Kade leant out of the side of the bed, steadying hands around my waist.

“Sorry.” I whispered. “I’m ok now.”

“Yeah, I think I might just keep a hold of you in case, ok beautiful?” Cole laughed as his hands moved down and wrapped one around my back and one around my front, holding me against him tightly.

“Get home guys. I’m good. Just take care of Olivia, yeah?” Kade said as he let me go and laid back.

“We got her.” Matt agreed as he gave Kade a chin lift.

“You get some rest too Kade. You have a concussion, you need to sleep.” I told him, remembering what Xander had said.

“I will. Stop worrying about me now. I’m good, thanks to you.” He smiled and it comforted me to see his usual cockiness back in place.

We all said our goodbyes and Cole all but carried me through the hospital and to Kade’s car. He climbed into the back and sat me in the centre seat. As soon as I was fastened in and cuddled up against his warm body, my eyes fell closed and sleep finally got to claim me.

CHAPTER 13

Three days later and things had calmed down and were pretty much back to normal. Kade took two days at home to rest and let the concussion pass, but returned to work that morning. Keira, who refused to return to work until she was sure Kade was recovered, also returned to her office that morning too.

Kyle had been working from home tirelessly, trying to get a lead on The Shadow, looking for similar cases, checking property holdings around the area I was found, and a ton more research he refused to discuss with me. He had been glued to his laptop night and day, determined to get a lead.

Cole and Matt had been good at entertaining me and helping me keep up with my school work, distracting me from the stories still flying through the media about me and their stupid

theories about where I was during my disappearance, and what I went through. The guys hadn't been spared either, with more stories of their pasts and speculation about which, or how many of them I was being taken advantage of by. I refused to read the stories, not wanting to find out about the guy's pasts from some misinformed reporter. They would tell me the truth, if they wanted me to know, when they were ready.

"Olivia, leave that now *Chica*. Come and eat." Matt said as he appeared at the door of the office, where I was finishing up an English Lit paper not due for a few weeks. I had to admit, I was really happy with how far ahead I had gotten with my schoolwork so far. I had struggled a little to begin with, but with help from the guys and a lot of hard study, I was now pretty far ahead and feeling confident I would catch up to the grade I should be at, in the next month or so.

"Happily." I agreed with a smile. I hit save, then closed the laptop with a sigh of relief. I had been working on the paper for hours and I needed a break.

Matt held his hand out to me as I stood, and I took it easily and followed as he pulled me through to the kitchen where he had laid out sandwiches, chips and some cupcakes he'd been making earlier that morning, at the island in the centre.

Cole, who already had a plate piled high with food, and a half eaten sandwich in his hand, motioned me over to sit in the chair beside him.

"Finished your work early did you?" I asked with humour. He too was supposedly working on an assignment, but from his clothes. I knew he'd been in the gym instead, as usual.

"I'll get to it later." He cried defensively, making me laugh. He hated doing school work and always put it off as long as he possibly could before actually getting it done at the last minute. Lucky for him he was smart enough that he managed to stay on top of it all.

"That's what you said last week, then I ended up staying up until 11pm helping you with your math paper." I pointed out

with an amused smile.

“After lunch, ok? I’ll get it done after lunch.” I nodded my approval, but remained sceptical.

Kyle arrived, taking a seat opposite me. He looked tired and stressed and I worried he was working way too hard. I had barely seen him sleep in the last three days.

“How’s it going?” Matt asked as he looked to Kyle with concern too.

“Slowly!” Kyle barked. “Whoever this fucker is, he’s like a fucking ghost.”

“You need to take a break Kyle. You’re working too hard.” I looked across to him pleadingly, needing him to slow down. I didn’t want him to run himself into the ground because of me.

“No. What I need is to catch this fucker before he comes looking for you again!” He growled.

Just the thought that The Shadow could come to the house, looking for me, had me shaking. What if he saw Evie first, or hurt one of the guys to get to me? I would never forgive myself if any of them were hurt, or worse, because of me, especially Evie.

I dropped the sandwich I was picking at and dropped my clenched hands to my lap. I looked down, studying them as I fought to breathe through the panic rising within me.

A large hand dropped on top of both of mine, wrapping them in warmth. I knew it was Cole before he spoke.

“You ok?” He asked. I looked up into his dark grey eyes and nodded shakily. I tried to reassure myself Kyle was just stressed, that he didn’t mean what he said, that The Shadow would not come for me again.

“Shit! I’m sorry Princess. I didn’t mean to upset you.” Kyle sighed as he studied me. “I just need to catch this fucker.”

“I’m ok.” I looked across and forced a smile to reassure him.

“Come on Brains, eat up. You can help me with my maths after lunch.” Cole joked, making me smile and relax a little. He always seemed to be able to do that for me.

I started eating the sandwich, tentatively, while the guys dove into their food like a pack of wild dogs.

“Cole and I, we were invited to a party tonight. It’s a guy from school who does the same party every year. We were wondering if you felt like coming? It should be fun.” Matt asked, taking me by surprise. I dropped the half eaten sandwich and tried to process the idea. I had never been to a party before, not since my friend Sarah’s mermaid themed, ninth birthday anyway.

“It’ll be busy, right?” I asked nervously, thinking of the teenage parties I had seen on TV. Could I really handle being surrounded by people like that?

“It will, but we’ll stay with you the whole time. We’ll keep you safe.” Cole promised and I had no doubt they would. It was tempting. I was sick of being cooped up in the house and it might be nice to do something kids my age do.

“I’m not sure this is a good idea. That kidnapper is still on the loose and if the press gets wind, they’ll be there in minutes trying to get pictures of Liv.” Kyle grumbled.

“It’s at Charlie’s place. You know how secure that house is, and we will not leave her side. She needs to be allowed to leave this house occasionally Ky.” Matt countered with a look of determination across his face.

“You want to go?” Kyle asked as he turned to me. I was unsure, but one look to Cole and Matt, seeing the hope and excitement in their faces, and I knew I had to try.

“Yes. I’d like to see what it’s like to be a regular teenager for once.” I admitted.

“Ok fine. But you two stay by her side the whole time, and if she gets anxious or wants to leave you bring her straight home. Am I clear?” Kyle ordered.

“Yes Dad,” Cole joked, making me smirk.

“And no drinking. Not when you have Olivia to take care of.”

“Of course not.” Cole agreed. “I can’t wait. This is going to be awesome!” Matt nodded his agreement, a big grin on his face.

I really hoped I didn’t freak out as soon as we got there, and let them both down.

“There. All done.” Keira said as she fluffed my hair up in the back. As soon as she found out about the party, she insisted on helping me get ready. She had already applied a little makeup and neatened up my shoddy haircut for me. She had just finished curling my hair with her curling iron.

“You look really pretty Honey, just beautiful.” She gushed, a huge smile on her face as she stood before me, looking me over.

“Go and change into the outfit we picked out, then you can see what you think.” She added. I had not been allowed to look in a mirror so far, Keira suggesting it would be better for me to wait until I could ‘get the full impact’, whatever that meant.

I nodded and walked through to the closet where the clothes Keira helped me pick out hung at the front. She had suggested a dress, but I wasn’t feeling confident enough for that, feeling I was no longer a dress kinda girl. Instead Keira had picked out a pair of black skinny jeans and a really pretty black chiffon layered, floaty top that had just thin straps and a low, but not too low, neck line. It was one of the many beautiful items Keira had chosen for me when she bought me clothes before I even arrived. I pointed out I would freeze, but Keira also pulled out my flat back knee high boots and cute grey leather jacket, assuring me I would be warm enough at the party.

I was unbelievably nervous about the whole thing, scared I would do something to embarrass Matt and Cole, but I was also pretty excited. It was nice to get all fancied up, and to have something normal to look forward to. It didn’t hurt

knowing I'd get Matt and Cole all to myself for the night too. Nothing had happened between Cole and I since our accidental kiss, but I did feel myself watching him around the house in a whole new way. Every time I saw him, the kiss replayed in my head and butterflies danced in my stomach.

“Are you alright in there Olivia Honey?” Keira called and I realised I was taking too long, lost in daydreams. I hurried to pull on the top, then grabbed my boots and jacket and ran out.

Keira was sitting on my bed and when she looked up she beamed at me.

“Perfect, just perfect.” She clapped her hands together excitedly and I couldn't help but smile. “Go take a look,” She ushered me over to the mirror across the room and I hurried over, wanting to see how I looked. It was the first time since my mom got me ready for school that last morning, so many years ago, that I had felt attractive and I was eager to see if my reflection mirrored the strange confidence I was feeling.

As soon as I looked in the mirror I smiled. I couldn't help it. The girl looking back at me looked so whole and happy. I was convinced it couldn't really be me. Keira had cut my hair in bangs around my face and they softened the harshness of my too thin face. She had cut it a little shorter, so it just sat off of my shoulders and it was all curled, looking really pretty and feminine. The make up she had applied was subtle, just giving me a little more colour on my cheeks and emphasizing my eyes with a little liner and some mascara. The outfit was perfect too. All of my scars were hidden, my figure looking at its best yet, in the tight jeans and the loose, but short top. I may have felt like a scared child, but I looked like a woman and it gave me a much needed boost.

“You're a magician.” I laughed as I turned back to Keira, unable to hold in my smile. “Nonsense. It's easy when I have such natural beauty to start with. You're stunning Olivia, never doubt that.”

“Thank you.” I knew I was glowing red, embarrassed by her comments.

“No thanks needed. I had fun having some girl time. We need to do it more.”

“I’d like that.” I agreed. I hadn’t seen that much of Keira or Grant because they worked a lot, but what I had seen I liked a lot. They were good people with big hearts. There was nothing they wouldn’t do for their family, including me. They had made me a part of their home and their family with no reservations and it had really helped me begin to heal. I just hoped one day I could show them how very grateful I was, for everything.

“Go on Honey, you head out now. The boys will be waiting for you downstairs.” She ushered me out and gave me a wave from the door of her room, as I headed down the stairs nervously.

The guys were standing in the entrance hall, leant against the wall on their cells, waiting for me. They both looked good, Matt in dark jeans and a black, close fitting button down that showed his toned body. His sleeves were rolled to his elbows showcasing his muscular arms and I couldn’t help but follow them up to his ripped biceps and wide chest.

“Holy shit!” Cole gasped, and when I looked at him, he was staring up to where I stood on the last step. I blushed, hoping I didn’t look stupid, all made up as I was. “Olivia.....you.....you look fucking amazing.” Cole gasped, making me turn even redder. He looked pretty amazing himself, dressed in light grey chinos and a charcoal grey polo tee. His wild hair had been tamed, swept back off of his face and the grin on his face just completed his handsomeness.

“What he means to say is, you look beautiful *carina*.” Matt laughed as he too looked over me with a smile.

“Yeah, what he said.” Cole agreed, still staring at me.

“Thank you. You both look really good too.” I agreed as I took the last step and approached them.

“We scrub up alright.” Cole said with false modesty, as he ran a hand through his hair supermodel style.

“You ready to go, *Chica*?” Matt asked while shaking his head at Cole’s antics.

I bent down to pull on my boots over my jeans, then shrugged on my jacket.

“Ready when you are.” I agreed as I checked for my cell in my jacket pocket, where I put it earlier. I knew the guys promised to stay with me and I was sure they would, but if I got separated I wanted a way to contact them.

“Hold up!” Kyle’s voice boomed as he came running in from the kitchen.

“Here we go.” Cole muttered under his breath.

“We know Kyle. Keep Olivia with us, bring her home if she wants or needs to, no drinking and drive carefully. You told us like a million times today.” Matt moaned, but Kyle wasn’t listening. He was just staring open mouthed at me.

“Fuck Princess. You look amazing.” He whispered as he stared right into my eyes. “Fucking beautiful.” He added, making me blush yet again.

“Thanks.” I whispered shyly. He stared at me for a moment longer, then seemed to shake himself out of it and looked back to the guys.

“Keep her close. Every guy in there will be all over her in a minute if you leave her alone.” Kyle growled. If I wasn’t so naive I would think he was jealous?

“Not happening.” Cole’s reply was a growl too and I wondered what the heck was wrong with them.

“Come on. We need to get going.” Matt declared, taking my hand.

“You got your cellphone Liv?” Kyle asked. I nodded and patted my pocket to prove it. “You need me, you call and I’ll be there in minutes, yeah?”

I pulled my hand from Matt and hurried over to Kyle, hugging him tight, but briefly.

“I’ll be fine.” I told him as I held him. He nodded once, so I let him go and returned to Matt. Cole appeared at my other side and took my other hand, then we were on our way.

We Had to get access through some huge metal gates into the grounds of the house where the party was. As Cole drove through them I gasped at the monster of a house before us. It was literally a mansion, at least three times the size of Grant and Keira’s, which, by the way, I already thought was huge!

“This is someone’s house?” I asked as I gawped out of the window of the backseat.

“Yeah. Most of the kids who go to our school have super rich families, but Charlie is one of the richest.” Matt answered.

“But he’s also one of the coolest. A lot of the kids at school are over privileged, entitled assholes, but Charlie isn’t. His is the only party we would bother to come to.” Cole added as he parked up his shiny new Chevrolet Colorado truck he had excitedly shown me just the other day. Apparently it was his eighteenth birthday present from Grant and Keira just two months before and he was very proud of it. He hadn’t used it since I moved in because we were always either in Matt’s older truck, or Kades huge SUV.

I became increasingly nervous as I saw the number of cars parked up on the huge gravel driveway out front of the house, and all of the other teenagers around, and pouring into the house. The girls were all very glamorous looking, in tight little dresses and super short skirts and I knew I was going to show Matt and Cole up in comparison.

“Cole, maybe you should just drop me back at home and then you guys come back. I’m not going to fit in here and I don’t want to embarrass either of you.” I said nervously as I looked to my fidgeting hands in my lap. Cole took off his seatbelt and turned in the driver’s seat to face me. I continued staring at my hands, ashamed that I was backing out before we even left the car.

“Olivia? Look at me, beautiful.” He said after a few moments. I took a deep breath and then looked up to him. Matt was turned in his seat too, watching with concern.

“If this is too much and you want to go home, then we can go, no problem. Matt and I would never push you to do something you don’t want to.” He said softly. I nodded once, letting them know I knew that, that I trusted them both. “You’re probably right, you won’t fit in with the stuck up kids in there, we certainly don’t. There are only a handful of these people who we would actually call friends, but it doesn’t matter because we have each other, and now you, and you will have us both with you the whole time. We wouldn’t have even come tonight unless you did Olivia. We just wanted to do something fun with you, for you. You’ve been so cooped up at home since you got free. It’s your time to live now, to find out who you are.” He implored, reminding me of the conversation I had with him a while ago, when I told him I had no idea who I was after eight years in *The Darkness*.

“You are beautiful *Carina*. We will be proud to walk in there with you tonight. You could never, ever embarrass us.” Matt added, making me blush. I didn’t think I would ever get used to all of the compliments I got from these guys.

I looked out of the window again and saw three guys all horsing around, shoving each other and laughing. They looked about my age, maybe even a little younger. If they could be there, then why couldn’t I? Cole was right, I wanted to find out who I was, and mixing with others my age and doing things they do regularly, seemed like a good next step. I took a deep breath to calm my fears and looked to the guys again.

“Ok.” I whispered. “Let’s do this.” I actually smiled as I spoke, excited to get inside. I could hear music pumping out of the house and it both terrified and excited me. I used to love to dance as a kid.

“We’re not leaving your side.” Matt promised as he smiled back. I nodded, knowing they wouldn’t.

Cole jumped out first and opened the back door, offering me a hand, since the truck was way too high from the ground for me to gracefully jump down. He held one hand and wrapped the other around my waist, lifting me down and settling me on my feet. I straightened up my outfit while he closed the door and locked his truck, then took his hand again. We walked to the back of the truck where Matt was waiting and without thought I took his hand in my free one, needing to have them both close.

“Stay with us and just let us know if you need a breather, ok?” Cole asked.

“I will. I’m ok. I can do this.” I told them. They both threw me a supportive smile, then led me up the huge stone steps and into the chaos.

The entrance way we walked into was bigger than the lounge at home, and filled with a ton of teenagers, all with red cups in their hands. They stood in groups, some couples kissing the heck out each other, some bigger groups chatting and laughing. The music was louder in here, than outside, but not loud enough to scare me. I actually really liked it. The song was upbeat with a great rhythm. I didn’t know it, but I guessed it was likely modern, and it was a long time since I listened to any new music.

“Cole! Matt! You came!” A loud voice shouted from our right side. I startled and gripped the guys hands much tighter, not letting them let me go in any way.

“Like we’d miss one of your parties.” Cole laughed as he fist bumped a fast approaching guy, who I assumed must be Charlie. He was cute, in a boy next door kind of way, with short sandy blonde hair and deep brown eyes. He was much shorter than my guys, maybe a little over five and a half feet and he was stick thin, not a single muscle visible. He fist bumped Matt too and I caught sight of the silver Rolex on his wrist. Even I knew that meant money, but his clothes looked scruffy, jeans way too baggy on him and a thin white t-shirt

with holes near the bottom corner. Was that fashion? If it was I'd stay unfashionable thanks.

“Who’s your friend?” He asked as he very slowly did a head to toe scan of my body, making me feel very uncomfortable.

“This is Livy.” Matt introduced me, but he sounded tense and when I glanced up at him I saw his whole body was rigid. I turned to Cole, wondering what was wrong, only to find he too was grinding his jaw angrily.

“Pleasure to meet you Livy.” Charlie said and when I looked at him there was a wide smile on his face. I nodded, too freaked out by the guy’s reactions to speak. “You go to our school?”

“Not at the moment, but maybe next semester.” Matt replied for me.

“Let’s hope so. You’d sure brighten the place up, gorgeous.” He threw me a wink, but it didn’t make me blush, or make butterflies take flight in my stomach like it did when one of my guys did it.

The thought did occur to me that they weren’t actually my guys, and I should probably stop calling them so, but they were about all I had and I needed them. Calling them mine made me feel less alone and I didn’t see the harm if I was only saying it in my head.

“We’ll catch you later Charlie. Livy needs a drink.” Cole growled and he pulled me slightly behind him then stepped forward. Matt was so close to my back I could feel his heat, but I wasn’t complaining. It was fine by me, to be in a Matt and Cole sandwich.

“Ohhh!” Charlie crowed, as we passed him. “Sorry dudes. I totally see how it is now!” He was laughing as he walked away and I wondered what the hell he was talking about. Why was he apologising?

“Come on, beautiful.” Cole whispered as he pulled me tight against his back and grabbed my hand, which he wrapped around his waist. He kept a hold of it in his, against his

stomach and as he moved, I had no choice but to stay pressed tight against him, while Matt hovered very close behind me.

Cole led me through to the biggest kitchen I ever saw in my life. It was the size of a restaurant with shiny white cabinets and sleek white countertops. The floor was bright white too, and while it was impressive, it felt way too clinical to be a home.

“You want a drink?” Matt offered as he nodded to a wall of glass fronted refrigerators. One was stacked with water and sodas. The others were filled with wine in racks, which I guessed were pretty valuable since they had number keypads on them, like the gate at home. On the counter beside the refrigerator were two huge kegs of beer and about twelve jugs filled with various multi coloured liquids. I wondered what they were, then saw a girl pouring liquor into one of the empty jugs across the kitchen, making some kind of cocktail. As nervous as I was, I decided it wasn’t a good idea to try drinking for the first time, plus Kyle said no drinking.

“Water would be good please.” I had to talk into his ear, the music too loud for my still weak voice to get over. He nodded and left me standing with Cole, while he grabbed a water and two cokes.

“Are you ok?” Cole asked into my ear as Matt handed us drinks. I nodded, deciding it was pointless to shout more than necessary.

Matt grabbed my water and slipped it in his coat pocket, then grabbed my hand and pulled me through the kitchen, Cole trailing behind holding my other hand.

He led us outside where there were more huge groups of teens, drinking, smoking and just messing around. In the corner of the large yard there was a huge fire pit with a raging fire going. There were about twenty chairs surrounding it, most of which were empty. Matt led us over and we all sat, me in the middle with the guys on either side.

“Thought you might want a break from the music.” Matt explained. He handed me my water and opened his coke.

“I quite like the music. It’s got a good beat. I just can’t talk over it, with my voice and all.”

“You like dancing?” Cole asked. I turned and smiled when I found him sitting right back in the low garden chair, one ankle over his opposite knee, looking as laid back as ever.

“I used to, when I was little. My Mom....when she cooked she’d always have music playing, and I’d make her crank it up so we could dance around the kitchen.” I smiled as I recounted the silly little thing I used to do with my mom. It had been so long since I remembered those fun times. I had pushed all good memories away for so long in an effort to stop the hope I would ever get any of it back. Getting them back, allowing the good parts of my past in was both thrilling and heartbreaking.

“Well I suck at dancing, but Matt can move. He’ll take you to dance if you want to.” Cole laughed. I turned to Matt who nodded, a smile on his face. I liked the idea very much and I nodded eagerly.

“We’ll go, but let’s just sit a while first.” Matt agreed.

“It’s nice out here.” I said as I sat back and looked out at the gardens before me. They were beautifully landscaped, with winding paths, beautiful flower beds and a stunning pergola in the opposite corner, absolutely all of it covered with a dusting of fresh snow. We were facing out, the wildness of the party behind us and with the flames dancing before me, it truly was magical. I was cold, but the fire was throwing off enough heat to keep the worst of the chill at bay.

I thought Keira and Grant’s gardens were special, but this one was like the grounds of a palace in a fairytale. Just beautiful.

“It really is.” Cole agreed, but when I glanced at him he was watching me.

We sat for a while, no one else coming to join us or bother us. We just laughed and chatted about the wild antics of the

brothers growing up. They both had me laughing so hard I cried at the things the five of them had done to each other growing up. It was a miracle any of them survived. I would have thought Keira would have killed them all years ago for the things they had gotten up to!

Matt and I were getting ready to try the dance floor in the lounge when a huge guy threw himself down into the chair beside Cole, scaring me enough to grab Cole's knee, ready to rip him away from danger.

"Hey Davis." He sneered. He was smaller than Cole, but not by much, with short, curly auburn hair and a very strangely coloured sun tan. He was almost orange, which was weird enough, but also I was confused how anyone would have a suntan in the middle of a Chicago winter? His eyes were small and just a little too close together and when he smiled, his teeth were way too sparkling white and perfect. I instantly disliked him, getting bad vibes that made me feel completely on edge. I tried to pull Cole away by the hand I had grabbed to get a better hold of him, but he just wrapped his other hand around mine and squeezed reassuringly. I glanced up to Matt and he smiled, but I knew it was forced.

"Who's the hot girl?" The guy asked as he looked me over with a sneer.

"None of your business Steve. Stay the fuck away from her, and us." Cole growled menacingly. I had never heard him sound so scary. He didn't move in any way, just growled and stared the guy down. It was a huge contrast from my always gentle Cole, but it didn't scare or panic me, because I knew he would never turn his anger on me. I trusted him. I trusted all of them.

"Hey, only asking. She's new here. She might need some new friends." The guy, Steve, said. He was trying to act as though Cole hadn't scared him, but his voice had become croaky and less cocky, and he had moved to the front edge of his chair, ready to jump up.

"She has all of the friends she needs." Cole added.

“What? The girl can’t speak for herself?” Steve asked. I swallowed the huge lump in my throat, knowing I needed to do something before Cole, and Matt who also looked ready to blow, literally exploded.

“I’m not interested, so move on *Steve*.” I said as loudly and as firmly as I could, trying hard to channel Keira when she yelled at the guys.

“Fucking losers.” Steve muttered as he stood and stormed off. I watched him leave and head into the house, then turned back to Cole.

“Sorry Livy. He’s an asshole.” He said and I could see he was trying to cool off, taking deeper than usual breaths.

“Are you ok? You handled that really well.” Matt said as he ran his hand over my shaking knee.

“Yeah,” I nodded then thought for a second if I actually was, and I realised that I was better than ok. I spoke, to a stranger no less, a big scary stranger and I didn’t break down, I didn’t crumble and I didn’t freeze. “Yes. I’m really ok. That felt good.” I added with a huge grin. Maybe I wasn’t quite as pathetic as I thought.

“You did good, beautiful girl.” Cole agreed. “Maybe who you are now is tougher than you thought, huh?”

“Maybe.” I agreed.

“Come on. I’m taking you to dance while you’re feeling brave.” Matt laughed as he jumped up and held a hand out to me.

It had been a small victory in reality, but a huge one to me at that time. The first step in me realising I left The Darkness a hell of a lot tougher than I entered it.

I was sweating and it was gross, but I just didn’t have it in me to care. I had been dancing for hours and the guys couldn’t pull me away. I loved it, the music running through my body and making me move. To start with it had just been Matt and I,

and Cole had been right, Matt could move. He had pressed me to his body and we had swayed together, like we became one person. I loved the feel of his hard body around me, the way his hands caressed my back and pulled me close any time anyone got close. I had no idea what I was doing, but I just let the music take me and I loved it. I had never felt more alive. Halfway through I pulled off my leather jacket and handed it to Cole who stood at the side, talking to a guy he knew. He kept on handing us water and everytime I glanced over to him, he was watching us with a grin on his face, even as he chatted with his friend.

When after a while I looked up and he was on his own, I left Matt and ran over to him. I grabbed my jacket and his hand and dragged him over to our little space on the packed floor. He was grumpy at first, crossing his arms and refusing to join in, but I was determined, wanting to have this amazing night with him too. I tied the arms of my jacket around my waist, not wanting to put it down and lose it, then pressed my back into Coles front and moved slowly. It took a little coaxing, especially since Matt was laughing his ass off at Cole, but eventually Cole grabbed my waist and started to move with me. It turned out he was a pretty good mover too, his hips swaying perfectly with mine as we moved.

Now I was pressed between the two of them, Cole at my back, his huge hands covering my stomach as he moved behind me and Matt at my front, his hands cradling my hips as the three of us laughed and danced to the smooth song that blasted from the sound system somewhere in the room.

I had seen people around us, watching us, their faces disapproving and judgemental. Girls were talking to each other and pointing our way, as they glared at me and I knew what we were doing likely wasn't accepted, but I did not care at all. I was happier than I had been since I was a child. I felt whole and so very alive. I felt free.

Having Cole and Matt holding me the way they were, made me forget my broken, shattered pieces. It made me forget The Shadow and The Darkness. For those few hours I was just a

girl, having the time of my life with two guys I cared for very much. I wasn't The Shadow's plaything, or the damaged girl, or the kidnap victim, or the kid whose parents died. I was just Olivia and it felt like a long time since I got to be just her.

"Woah woah woah!" Cole declared as a song finished. We were all sweating now and I was exhausted, but I didn't want the fun to end. "We need to take a break. You need to rehydrate and Matt's about to drop dead." He pointed behind me to Matt and when I turned, I realised he was really red and sweating. I had been holding him on the dance floor for hours. Poor guy.

"Ok, fine!" I agreed with a mock pout.

"Don't worry. I'll be taking you dancing again." Matt said in my ear, sending goosebumps all over my body. I smiled up at him and he nodded, a smile on his face too.

"Head outside. I'll grab water and meet you." Cole yelled. Matt nodded and wrapped his arms around me from the back. He ushered me outside, stopping to grab their jackets, which were on an armchair by the door, as we passed.

I stepped outside, taking a deep breath of the fresh, cool, night air. It was a relief after the mass of hot bodies I had been amongst for so long.

Because Matt had grabbed the jackets, he only had one hand on my waist and was slightly behind me. That was the reason huge hands were able to grab me around the waist and yank me from his grip. I never even saw it coming. I had literally stepped onto the patio and taken the breath, then the next thing I knew I was suddenly being ripped from Matt and into the air. I cried out as I looked down, praying it was Cole messing around, but it wasn't, it was Steve, and he stank of beer and cigarettes.

"My turn now." He laughed as he pulled me hard against him and started grinding against me.

I was frozen at first, too shocked and confused to react, but within seconds I was fighting, slapping at him. My feet

weren't touching the ground, so I couldn't run.

"Get off me!" I yelled, only half of the words coming out with my weak, panicked voice. In a matter of seconds I felt another hand around my waist, just as a fist flew from beside me at Steve. I turned, confused and terrified, and found Matt holding me up in one arm, the punch thrown with his other.

"MOTHERFUCKER!" He raged as he swung me behind him and looked down at Steve who was sprawled on his back, blood pouring from his nose. The rage pouring from Matt completely changed him from my soft, kind, understanding guy, into someone dangerous and wild. I guessed it made me odd, but I found it kind of sexy, even in my panicked state.

"Matt?" Cole walked out of the glass doors and instantly ran to me, pushing me behind him too. "What the fuck?"

"Sonofabitch grabbed Livy and started trying to grind up against her." Matt spat, not taking his eyes off of Steve, who had now sat up and was wiping away blood from his mouth, a sneer on his face.

"What's the problem boys? I thought after the show she put on in there, she'd be more than up for it." He laughed.

"You better watch your fucking mouth dickhead." Cole growled.

"Oh, sorry. Is it cash up front? How much is it, sugar?" I was confused by his comment, but Cole and Matt clearly weren't. They both lunged and started in on Steve. Matt bent down and punched him again while Cole kicked his side hard. The anger on both of their faces was in complete contrast to my gentle guys and it shocked me, but also reassured me. I knew they would protect me.

I was shaking so hard I could barely stay upright, traumatised at the thought of Steve's hands on me, but also having triggered memories of other unwanted hands on me, The Shadow's body rubbing up against me.

"STOP!" I screamed, to all of it, and to Matt and Cole. I needed them beside me. I needed them to be my good guys

again. The sound of fists on flesh was bringing back memories I couldn't handle.

I forced myself to open my eyes and thankfully Cole and Matt had stopped. Steve was laid out, a cut on his eyebrow and his nose still bleeding, but he looked to have gotten off lightly.

Cole started toward me, but he had blood on his fists and all I could see was The Darkness and blood, my blood, everywhere. I ran into the garden, darting around groups of people who had been watching the scuffle. I ran into the pergola, which was empty and dark. I needed the dark. I was safe in the dark. Only the light ever brought The Shadow.

I fell into the back corner and curled up. I was crying and the shaking wouldn't stop.

"*Carina?*" Matt knelt on the wooden floor before me, leaving a little space. I had my knees pulled up to my chest and my face buried in them. "I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have let that happen." He whispered.

"And we shouldn't have reacted like that." Cole added. I guessed he was somewhere on my right, though further back than Matt.

"I just saw red. We both did. You've been through so much, we won't let anyone hurt you again."

"Cole's right. You mean so much to us. I know we get overprotective, but that asshole deserved it. He had no right to put his filthy hands on you."

"I-is this m-y fault.....is it b-because of the dancing?" I asked, my voice trembling and hard to get out between gasps for air.

That's what Steve had said, that I put a show on. Was the way I was dancing bad? Did I provoke him? I didn't think I did anything wrong, but all of the people had been glaring at me before.

"No Olivia! That guy is a complete douchebag! He was just mad because you sent him on his way earlier. He's rich and a

footballer. He isn't used to being turned down." Matt explained.

"You did nothing wrong, beautiful. What we do to enjoy ourselves is no one's business but ours." Cole agreed.

"Besides, even if you were stripping on that dance floor and dancing around naked, it doesn't give anyone the right to lay hands on you like he did."

I took a deep breath and looked up. My face was soaked with tears and I knew I was a mess. But I felt better, what Cole said made sense. Steve had no right to grab me like he did, and I was kind of glad the guys hurt him.

"C-an we g-go home.....please?" I asked as calmly as I could.

"Yes please. I've been danced to a freaking near heart attack! I'm beat," Matt joked, making me smile through my tears.

"Come on, Babygirl." Cole said as he held his hand out to me from where he stood beside Matt. I took it and he pulled me up. Matt wrapped his jacket around my quaking shoulders, then they both wrapped an arm around me, holding me between them. I was shaky and exhausted, but Cole's arm around my shoulders and Matt's around my waist gave me the support I needed to walk through the gardens and down the side of the house.

"I r-really did love all of the dancing." I told them once I felt a little calmer.

"So did we *Carina*. We will definitely do that again, but next time we'll take you to a club and Kade and Kyle can come with us."

"Really? That sounds great. Can they dance?" I asked.

"Kade can. I don't know about Kyle." Cole replied.

"I bet he's t-too grumpy to dance." I laughed, my shaking calming, and my tears finally stopped. They both laughed as they ushered me through a tall metal gate that I assumed led to the front where we left the truck.

“Don’t let him hear you say that.” Cole warned. I turned to him with a smile, but his face dropped and he and Matt both stopped me. I looked up, alarmed and found Steve before us, surrounded by six other guys, three on each side of him.

“Not so cocky now are you, Davis?” Steve laughed. Cole and Matt, in sync, pushed me behind them and closed the gap between them, completely blocking my view of what was going on with their huge frames.

“You not man enough to face me one on one, motherfucker?” Cole spat. Were all seven of them going to hurt Cole and Matt? I was panicking, but I knew I needed to do something. I reached into my back pocket of my jeans and pulled out my cell which I put there when I took off my jacket earlier. I knew there wasn’t time to fall apart. Matt and Cole were really in trouble and I wouldn’t let them be hurt, not if I could help it.

“What? You mean like you two attacking me earlier?” Steve growled. He was really pissed off. This was all my fault.

I swiped my cell open and sent a group text to Kyle and Kade.

OLIVIA: C & M in trouble. 7 against 2. Come quick pls.

I was slow to text so I kept it as short as possible. I was sure they would come. I just hoped they saw it in time.

“You grabbed our girl and started rubbing your nasty ass self against her. You had it coming, you dumb fuck!” Matt hissed.

“Nah! It was your girl who had it coming, and she’s gonna get it once you two fuckers are dealt with!” Steve was laughing, like a maniac and I knew I was screwed if these seven losers got my guys down.

My cell phone vibrated in my hand and I actually cried in relief, tears trickling down my cheeks. I unlocked it quickly and as I opened the first text, a second came in.

KYLE: 3 MINS

KADE: Im coming love x

I took a deep breath and fought to calm myself. They were coming. Kyle would be there in minutes. We just needed to stall.

“Try it dipshit and we’ll end you!” Cole roared. *Great! Way to stall Cole!*

I don’t know who attacked first, but Cole and Matt started throwing punches as six guys launched at them. In seconds three guys surrounded each of them. I whimpered, terrified for them as Steve’s sidekicks started trying to lay into my guys. Matt and Cole held their own. Cole threw a punch, hitting the biggest of his three so hard he dropped to the ground. Matt started kicking out behind him like a ninja as he pushed back another guy who tried to grab him.

“Livy, go! Get inside to Charlie!” Cole yelled, but I couldn’t leave them, especially when I saw Steve moving toward Matt who already had two of his guys down.

The last one Matt was fighting was fast and he moved like a boxer. He punched out at Matt’s head, but Matt managed to move to the side swerving the hit, only for the guy to hit with his other hand, catching Matt hard in the side. I knew it was a hard impact, from experience, and images of me being hit just the same way, just the same sound of fists impacting flesh tried to push into my mind, but I pushed it away. Matt was doubled over trying to catch his breath and Steve was moving in while he was down.

I glanced over to Cole, but he was still dealing with two of his attackers, and he was favouring his left side, obviously a damaged rib. They’d both taken too many hits and they were bleeding and waning. I wouldn’t let Steve lay into them, now that they were easy targets for him. The guy was a coward, too scared to face the both of my guys when they weren’t hurt, but

going for them while they were weakened. He was a bully, and I hated bullies.

I shrugged Matt's jacket from my arms, letting it fall to the floor and then I dropped my phone on top of it. There were a dozen or so people who had come around the corner to watch, but no one was stepping in or doing anything. I knew I had to help. I'd be little more than useless, but I would damn well try for my guys.

Steve was bent down, about to throw a punch at Matt's exposed back. I knew the move, had it used on me enough times. A punch to the kidneys was agony, and incapacitating. I felt the anger of every hit I had taken, every session of torture and abuse I had endured, but most of all, the anger of these idiots attacking my guys, and I channeled it for Cole and Matt.

I let out an angry cry as I ran at Steve as hard as I could and leapt at him. He was bent enough that I landed on his back and clung on like a wild animal. I climbed up him as he tried to throw me off, until my hands were around his sweaty, disgusting face and I just started scratching and grabbing at anywhere I could touch.

"Fucking crazy whore!" Steve yelled, but I was holding him so tight he couldn't shake me off. He tried to grab my legs to unclamp them from his sides, but I just reached down and scratched at his hands instead.

Eventually he got a hold of my arms and ripped me off of him, throwing me down with force, but it was nothing I wasn't used to. My arms scratched on the gravel as I spun to my back and flipped up to my feet.

"You're going to regret that you little bitch!" Steve spat as he ran at me. I waited until the last second, then feigned right. He dove for me, but missed and went stumbling forward. I ran behind him and got low, ready to jump at him.

"Olivia, get the hell out of here!" Matt yelled. I looked round to him just as the guy he was fighting hit him square in the face. Matt went down and stopped moving.

“Matt!” I cried. I looked to Cole, who was barely standing and panicked. There were two of Steve’s sidekicks still standing, two on the floor, and two had run off. Hearing the growl coming at me I turned back to Steve in a panic, but he was closer than I thought. I tried to swerve away from him, but he grabbed me by the front of my top, tearing it in the process. I started hitting out and kicking, anything to get out of his hold, but he now had hold of my arms and he was strong.

“Good job I like ‘em fiery.” He hissed as he lifted me clean off the ground and glared at me.

I wanted to freeze, or scream, or something, but instead I tried to focus. I wasn’t alone and I wasn’t locked away. Fighting wasn’t pointless here.

I reached out my hands and started clawing at his face again. My nails were long and I dug them into his eyes, scratching at him. He wailed and threw me hard at the ground again, this time even more violently. I landed so hard it knocked the breath from me, but I knew I had to get up. I rolled to my front, my back throbbing badly from the impact. I took a deep breath and pushed onto my hands and knees to stand, but then I heard him, Kyle!

His car screeched to a stop just metres from where I knelt and he leapt out of the car looking like some dark angel in black jeans and a fitted black henley.

“You’re dead fucker!” He said it so calmly, he sounded deadly, as he glared at Steve.

Steve and his two sidekicks still standing started to run away, while the two on the floor fought to stand.

I looked to Matt, knowing Kyle would handle Steve. Matt was still knocked out on the floor and Cole dropped too, though he was conscious, but bleeding.

“Matt!” I gasped as I started crawling across the gravel to him. Cole was moving to him too and we both arrived at either side of him together.

“Fuck Livy! Are you ok?” Cole asked.

“Yes. Forget me!” I cried. “Look at Matt and you!”

I turned when I heard more punching and found Kyle over Steve, landing a hit to his face, which was already bleeding from my attacks.

“Kyle! Stop!” I hadn’t even seen Kade pull up, but he was getting out of his SUV, wearing his CPD t-shirt and a badge around his neck.

“Look what he’s fucking done! I’m gonna kill him!” Kyle roared, and the anger on his face was like nothing I had ever seen, yet it didn’t scare me because I knew it was anger for us, anger he would never use against me or the people he loved. He was just fiercely protective.

“We’re pressing charges. He’ll get what he’s due.” Kade said as he shoved Kyle off of Steve and dragged the rather sorry looking asshole to his feet.

“This isn’t over Davis!” He spat blood on the drive, but he was too weak to even stand properly, having received quite a beating from Kyle.

“You go near my family again and you’ll be wishing I ended you today you little shit!” Kyle raged as he stood menacingly.

“Check on them Kyle!” Kade ordered as he dragged Steve toward a patrol car that was just pulling in.

“Matt? Matt, wake up!” I said as I tapped his cheek gently.

“Olivia?” He groaned.

“I’m here. We’re all here. Kade and Kyle too.”

“Cole?”

“I’m here. I’m good. Olivia went all homicidal chick, and kept Steve busy until Kyle arrived.” He laughed, then grimaced in pain.

“Your ribs?” I asked as I looked him over with worry. He had several cuts and bruises on his face and he was knelt favouring his right side.

“Liv! What the fuck? Where are you hurt?” Kyle demanded as he dropped to his knees beside me.

“I’m fine, but Matt was unconscious and I think Cole has cracked ribs.”

“I fucking told you guys this was a bad idea.” Kyle growled as he pointed at the guys.

“Thanks bro. That’s just what we need to hear after a seven on three fight.” Matt groaned.

“It would have been seven on two, but Livy went all badass warrior on us.” Cole laughed, then winced again.

“Don’t start on them Kyle!” I snapped. “They almost got themselves killed because of me!”

“No beautiful, not because of you. Because Steve is a pussy who can’t take no for an answer, and isn’t man enough to fight fair.” Cole corrected.

“Did that fucker touch her?” Kyle asked and he was already half on his feet again.

“Kyle!” I yelled as loud as I could. “Stop being an ass, and take care of your brothers!”

When I looked back at Matt, he, Cole and Kyle were staring at me open mouthed.

“What the fuck have you guys awoken in our sweet little Liv?” Kyle asked, making me smile. I did feel stronger. It had been a crazy night, but in the end I had stood up to my fears and protected my guys a little. It felt good to be strong.

“Guys, are you ok? Do I need to call an ambulance?” Kade asked as he came hurrying over.

“I’m good. I’ve had worse.” Cole groaned and I winced at the thought of him being hurt worse than he was now.

“Me too. Just help me up. My head’s fucking killing.” Matt tried to sit up and Kade hurried to help him to his feet, holding him up with an arm around his shoulders.

“So, good night kids?” Kade laughed as I helped Cole stand with Kyle at his other side.

“Fucking fantastic!” Cole groused as he stumbled, then cursed because he shook his side.

“Hey! I did have a nice time before all of this actually!” I cried.

“Yeah. Turns out Livy loves the dance floor.” Matt smiled as he told the others, telling me he had enjoyed that part too.

“Well it might be a long while before you see another one Princess. Mom and Dad are never letting you guys out again after this. They’re gonna freak!” Kyle pointed out and both Matt and Cole groaned.

“They shouldn’t get in trouble. It was my fault.” I argued. “I was dancing, and I made them both dance with me. Steve thought it was a show, or something...and he wanted his turn. He thought he could grab me...touch me. The guys were just looking out for me, then those guys jumped us. The guys protected me. They didn’t do anything wrong!”

“Hey hey! It’s ok Love. We know. No one is going to be in trouble. Mom and Dad will just worry about you all, and want you all to stay home to be safe.” Kade said as he took my hand and squeezed it reassuringly.

“He fucking grabbed you?” Kyle asked, angry again.

“He thought his guys would get us down so he could do what he wanted with Livy. He’s a fucking psycho!” Cole growled.

“Motherfucker!” Kyle spat angrily. Kade threw him a chastising glance, then turned back to Cole.

“Good job he underestimated you two then, isn’t it?”

“Three. Livy kicked some ass herself tonight.” Matt threw me a wink as he spoke and I blushed as usual.

“You should have gotten yourself the hell out of there as soon as it kicked off. You could have been hurt.” Kyle warned.

“There was no way I was leaving them. I wasn’t really much help, but I had to try. I’d do anything to keep all of you guys safe. I spent eight years rolling over and hiding. Not anymore. Tonight I found out that the new me, fights back.” I said firmly.

Cole cried out as he lifted his arm, but did it anyway and wrapped it around me. I opened my mouth to ask him what the hell he was doing, but he pulled me into his side and kissed my head.

“I’m so proud of you, Babygirl.” He whispered and I couldn’t help but smile. It felt good to earn his praise. I was pretty proud of myself too. And I loved the cute new name he seemed to have for me.

Keira was the first to see us as we all walked back into the house, well Cole and Matt were more hobbling.

“Cole, Matt! Oh my God! What happened?” She cried as soon as we walked into the kitchen, where she was sitting at her laptop.

“They’re ok Mom. Just a little banged up.” Kade calmed as he helped Matt over to one of the tall stools to sit.

“Grant! Get in here!” Keira, who was clearly panicked, yelled at the top of her voice, scaring me and I instinctively covered my ears and stepped behind Kyle.

“Mom!” Kyle growled as he turned and wrapped his arms around me. I was once again shaking, adrenaline still surging through my body from the terror the whole thing had awoken in me.

Keira stood from her seat at the island and turned to us.

“Oh crap. I’m sorry Olivia. Are you ok Honey?” She said more softly. I quickly moved my hands, not wanting her to feel bad about shouting, and nodded. I stepped back from Kyle a little and brushed my wild hair behind my ears nervously.

“Oh God! You’re hurt too!” She cried as she ran over to me and ran her hands over my grazed arms.

“What’s going on?” Grant asked as he came into the kitchen dressed in sweatpants and a baggy t-shirt. It was strange to see him looking so relaxed.

“They’re all hurt, all three of them!” Keira cried, then held my arm up to illustrate.

Grant looked me over, then turned to where Cole now sat beside Matt at the island, his head in his hands.

“What on earth happened?” He asked.

“Steve Ellis is what happened.” Matt groaned.

“Please don’t tell me you two were fighting when you had Olivia with you?” Grant asked sharply.

“It wasn’t their fault Grant. That guy, Steve, he started the whole thing and the guys were just trying to stop him.” I defended the guys. It hurt to speak after all of the shouting and screaming I had done that night and I was just totally exhausted from the fight, but I had to at least try and explain.

“Come and sit down too Liv. You’re shaking like a leaf.” Kyle wrapped his arm around me and led me over to sit beside Cole, then he stood behind me, as if he was worried I’d keel over at any minute.

“Explain please Cole.” Grant pushed.

“Steve was interested in Livy, but she told him she wasn’t, and we walked away. Later he managed to grab her, and was rubbing himself on her. Matt grabbed her back pretty quick, but we may have both hit him, but again, we walked away and he got off lightly.”

“Oh Honey. Are you ok?” Keira asked from where she now stood against Grant beside the counter. I just nodded, not wanting to talk about or remember Steve pressing me against him.

“So how did the three of you end up in this state?”

“We were leaving. Livy was shaken up so we took her around the side of the house, instead of through the crowd. Steve was waiting for us around the side of the house, with six of his crew. He wanted to get us down so he could get to Livy.” Cole explained.

“What the hell? Seven of them against two?” Grant growled, clearly angry.

“Six of them came at us and we fought back, but we were outnumbered. Steve stood back for a while, but when he tried to join in, Livy dived at him.”

Grant looked across to me with wide eyes, clearly surprised.

“I had to. They were already really badly hurt.” I said shyly.

“I knew there was a tough nut in there somewhere.” Keira laughed, making me smile.

“Kyle turned up before things got bad. I still don’t know how you knew man?” Cole asked.

“I text him, as soon as we saw Steve and those guys.....I text him and Kade.” I admitted.

“Where’s this Steve now? He can’t be allowed to get away with this. If you three didn’t know how to defend yourselves they could have killed you.” Grant ranted. He was pacing a short distance, back and forth, clearly irate.

“I brought a patrol car. I arrested him for assault and had him taken in.” Kade said as he stepped forward from where he’d been standing in the corner listening.

“Good. We’re pressing charges. This isn’t the first time he’s caused trouble for you two. He’s not getting away with it this time.”

“He’s eighteen so he’ll be charged as an adult. We need to get pictures of all of your injuries to take things further. Were there witnesses?” Kade asked.

“There were some people watching, but they came after it all started.” The guys had gone quiet and I knew they must be

hurting.

“Should we take you to the ER? All three of you are looking pale and pretty rough.” Keira walked over to us as she spoke and put a hand on Cole’s shoulder until he lifted his head from the counter to look at her.

“I’m good. Some bruised ribs and a headache, is all.” Cole assured her.

“Matt looks to have a mild concussion. I’ll keep an eye on him.” Kyle said when Keira looked up to Matt, and he remained silent, his eyes closed and his head back.

“Olivia?”

“I’m ok,” I whispered.

“No you’re not. None of you are. This is ridiculous. I want this kid punished for this!” Grant raged, then he started walking away.

“Where are you going Honey?” Keira asked.

“To speak to the chief of police and the DA. I want to make sure this is properly handled! Get me those photos of every damned injury Kade!” He stormed from the kitchen then, cursing the whole way.

“Come on, let’s go up and take the pictures, then get cleaned up.” Cole said as he stood, then stumbled. Kyle reacted fast, reaching out to grab and steady him.

“Take it easy bro.” He said as he wrapped an arm around Cole’s back and held him still.

“Matt?” I whispered. He was still silent, with his head back and his eyes closed. I was worried.

“I’m good *Carina*. My head just really hurts.” He said quietly, then I felt his hand cover mine and squeeze a little.

“Go on up with Kyle, Love. I’ll help Matt.” Kade whispered. I nodded and hopped down off of the stool. Kyle grabbed my hand and we all headed up stairs.

Automatically, we all just headed into my room without a word and Cole and I both sat together on the end of my bed.

“You ok?” He asked as he took my hand in his much nigger one.

“Tired.” I whispered back.

“You’ll be able to get some sleep soon. Let’s just get these pictures. Steve needs to pay for what he put you through tonight.”

“What he put us all through.” I corrected. I had gotten off lightly compared to the guys.

Cole just nodded, as Kade lowered Matt to the bed on my other side. He took my free hand and we all just had a minute. Cole and Matt pressed tight against me and I felt so safe and warm between them. After all we had been through together that night, I think we needed a minute to just breathe.

Kade took out his cell phone and started taking photos of Matt’s head injury and any visible bruises and cuts. He did the same with Cole, then photographed my arms.

“Right, Matt you go first, then you can grab a shower and get some rest.” Kade said. Matt nodded and stood. He stepped forward so he was a few feet from me, then started pulling off his shirt. I blushed like crazy as he revealed his muscular body, but I couldn’t look away. He was so beautiful, like one of those greek God statues posh people have in their houses and gardens. He was all defined lines and rippling muscles, his front a perfect set of hard-worked-for abs, and his biceps defined, but not overly huge.

“Remember to breathe, brains.” Cole mocked, making me realise I was staring hard, but I really couldn’t look away. I slapped out at Cole blindly, while my eyes locked with Matts and a smug smile washed over his handsome face, that lazy smile that made my stomach flutter every time. .

I gasped when Matt turned slightly, a few moments later, and his entire right side was black and blue.

“Matt!” I cried, feeling every bruise with him.

“I’m good *Chica*. Stop worrying.” He soothed, but I was worried. He’d taken a real beating and all because of me. I hated it.

“You’re not good. You forget I know very well, what those bruises feel like.” I cried, angry and upset at the whole situation.

“They’ll heal. I’m good because you’re safe. That’s all I cared about, protecting you.” He walked over to me and dropped to his haunches, then cupped my face in his hands and wiped the stray tears away that had escaped, with his thumbs.

“You guys are too good for me. I’m not worth you being hurt.” I whispered tearfully.

“You are amazing Olivia, and I will always do whatever it takes to keep you safe. You make me want to be whole again.” His words were filled with emotion and I saw tears in his eyes. I felt the urge to kiss him, as I had Cole the week before, but I knew I couldn’t with the other guys all watching. Especially Cole. I may not know much about relationships, but I was pretty sure you weren’t supposed to kiss more than one guy in the same week.

Instead I leant forward and wrapped my arms around his shoulders, hugging him as tight as I dare, not wanting to hurt him.

“You make me want to be whole too.” I whispered into his ear, They all did. The four of them made me want to be a normal person for them, to be as strong for them, as they all were for me.

“Come on bud. I’ll come to your room while you shower, just in case you pass out or anything. How about we all camp out, in here tonight? I think it’d be good to be together after everything?” Kyle suggested.

“Sounds good. We need to keep an eye on Matt anyway.” Cole agreed.

“Olivia? It’s up to you Love?” Kade asked.

“I’d like that. I’m not ready to be on my own.” I admitted. Matt nodded, then kissed my cheek before standing. As he and Kyle walked out of my room I felt a pang in my chest. It was stupid, I knew they were coming back, but I didn’t want them away from me. I needed them close.

My attention was quickly redirected by Cole though, who stood and started singing a song about a pony, while he danced and stripped off his shirt, the whole time looking at me with what I suspected he thought were sexy faces.

His faces were hilarious, as was his tone deaf singing, and I clamped a hand over my mouth as I laughed my ass off. I knew it must be hurting him to gyrate around like he was, but he didn’t show it. I also knew the whole show was for my benefit, to make me smile. He was the most amazing person and I knew I was falling fast for him. The problem was, I was also falling equally fast for Matt, Kade and Kyle too.

Cole’s shirt came off and my laughter died and my mouth just hung open. I had been amazed by the muscles on Matt, but Cole! He was literally solid, tightly packed muscles. His biceps were as wide as my thighs and his eight pack was utter perfection. He was huge, his chest twice the width of me and his shoulders likely over a metre across. I couldn’t take in how much broader and muscleier he looked with clothes off. He had always been a giant to me, but he was even bigger before me now, and absolutely amazing to look at. I didn’t even care if I was drooling. Who wouldn’t, in my place?

“Livy like?” Cole asked in a weird voice and I forced myself to look up at the dorky face he was pulling.

“Do you like, live in the gym?” I asked dumbly.

“I got a lot of shit to work through. What can I say?” He laughed and I remembered the guys telling me they worked out when they were stressed and angry. That would explain why Cole was so ripped, except he never seemed angry or

stressed. He was the most laid back easy going guy in the house.

Kade started taking pictures of the huge purple bruises around Cole's ribs, where they had been brutally struck, and various other bruises marring his stomach and back.

"You hide that shit well then. You're always so happy?" I asked, curious.

"I always hit the gym when things get dark. It's why I go there so much. I don't like to take my crap out on everyone else." He explained with a shrug.

"And we tell him he's a dick. We all unload our shit on him, but he never returns his." Kade sighed with a roll of his eyes.

"It's good to talk through the hard stuff. You told me that Cole." I pointed out. He had asked me to turn to them when things got tough just days before.

"I did, and I was right, for you. I can handle my issues. I'm good, Brains." He assured me, but I knew he couldn't be. I didn't even know what Cole had come from, but Kade clearly worried about him, which meant the others did too. I decided I would do what I could to assure him I was there for him, whenever he needed to let it all out once and for all.

"These ribs could be cracked Cole. These bruises are nasty." Kade said as he looked closer.

"They're not. They're just bruised. I'll ice them tomorrow." Cole said it with the certainty of someone who had experienced cracked ribs and again I wondered what he had been through, what they had all been through.

"Fine, but take some Tylenol or you'll never sleep." Kade suggested and Cole nodded.

"Go grab a shower. I'll take photos of Livy and then I'll bring some mattresses in here for us all."

"Cool. I'll grab us all some drinks and snacks. We can watch a movie." Cole grabbed his shirt from beside me and turned to leave.

“Wait!” I cried, panicked. I ran over to him where he stood watching me from the door and pulled him down so I could whisper to him.

“Kade will see my scars.” I whispered to him then looked up at his face. He was the only one who had seen the mess my body was so far, and I was scared about what the other’s reactions would be.

“Livy, Love, I only need to see where you’re hurt. You don’t have to strip off like the guys did.” Kade said, obviously seeing I was anxious.

“You want me to stay?” Cole asked.

“Yes please and.....will you.....can you warn him?” I knew I should. I didn’t even know why I was scared. Kade wasn’t going to scream I was ugly and throw me out or anything, but I just hated those scars so much and I hated talking about them or letting anyone see them.

“It’s ok, Babygirl. Kade will be cool, but I’ll tell him.” Cole assured me quietly. I nodded and then followed him over to where Kade was waiting.

“What’s wrong?” Kade asked as we both neared him.

“Livy, she has scars, quite a lot, on her back and front. I saw them before, at the hospital, but she’s nervous about you seeing them.” Cole explained as he pulled me tight into his side and held me.

Kade looked down at me with understanding and smiled.

“Trust me, Love, I know a thing or two about scars.” Kade whispered, then he lifted the right side of his t-shirt, showing me just a little of his lower back. It was covered in what I knew were burn scars, nasty ones that covered the whole area.

“Kade.....I’m so sorry.” I gasped.

“They’re old now, but they cover most of my back.” He said as he put his t-shirt back in place. Old? As in, he was a child? I had no idea how a child would survive burns as severe as

those and I wanted to ask what happened, but seeing the pain in his face stopped me. He didn't want to discuss it.

"Thank you.....f-for showing me." I whispered.

"You shouldn't worry about scars. Wear them with pride. They prove you survived. They show your strength." He told me. It was similar to what Cole had said and I knew it was the way I should look at the marks on my body. The problem was, every time I saw them , all I could do was think of the nightmare part of my life that put them there.

"Come on, beautiful. Let's get this done and get you cleaned up." Cole suggested and I was glad to push things on. It was all too much emotion to handle.

"It's j-ust my back." I whispered as I turned away from Kade and lifted my top as much as I could. I watched in the mirror as he and Cole looked at my back, then up to each other. Cole just nodded, but Kade looked really mad, his jaw locked up tight and his face turning red.

"You have some nasty bruises back here, Brains. If you start feeling ill, you need to tell us and we'll call Xander. You could have hit your kidneys." Cole said, as I watched Kade in the mirror. He was frozen, just staring at me and not even taking the pictures of my bruises.

"I'm ok. It's just from where he threw me down a couple of times." I said, hoping to snap Kade out of it. I knew he was shocked by the state of my back. How could he not be? It was repulsive.

"Hey, shall I.....?" Kyle and Matt burst in, but Kyle stopped talking as soon as he looked at me. I watched in the mirror as both he and Matt slowly walked over and looked at my back. I wanted to stop them, to pull my shirt down, but I didn't. It was easier for them to just see them and to know if they were disgusted or not now, before I got too attached.

"Jesus Liv. How the hell did you survive?" Kyle gasped and I felt his cold fingers brushing against my patchwork of scars.

“Kyle, don’t.” Cole snapped, but I turned and looked at the four of them.

“It’s ok.” I whispered as I took my top off completely and stood before them in my bra, showing them my stomach too.

“You guys should see them all now. I get it, you know, if they freak you out or whatever?” I whispered, but I had never been so scared of rejection in my life. I was an idiot if I didn’t realise I was already way too attached to these guys to be able to walk away without being really hurt.

“*Carina*. No matter what you show us, we will all, always love you. Nothing can scare us away.” Matt said softly. I dared to look up at where he stood before me and my eyes met his.

“These scars, they just tell us what we all already knew, that you are the strongest person we have ever known. Our warrior.”

“You guys.....you love me?” I asked, dumfounded. Matt looked from me, to the others and they all started their silent mind talk for a moment.

“Come sit down, Princess.” Kyle said, then he took my hand and led me to sit on the end of the bed. He pulled the blanket from the foot of the bed and wrapped it around my quaking shoulders, then sat beside me. Matt sat at my other side and Cole and Kade crouched in front of me. I wondered what was wrong, but then I realised they were going to let me down gently. Matt hadn’t meant to say they loved me. He meant to say they liked me, maybe even cared for me. I could handle the let down, as long as they didn’t hate me. I never really expected one of them, let alone all of them to return the crazy feelings I had developed for each and every one of them.

“Olivia. We don’t want to scare you or overwhelm you, so if this conversation becomes too much, you just tell us to shut the heck up, ok?” Kade said, making me nervous, What the hell were they going to say? I knew I shouldn’t have shown the scars, I was such an idiot!

“What’s wrong, Babygirl?” Cole asked as he put a finger beneath my chin and raised my face until our eyes met.

“Nothing.” I whimpered as I fought the tears. “Just say what you need to.”

“Well, you already know we all come from bad places. None of us suffered as much as you have, Princess, but we’ve all had tough childhoods and we were all pretty messed up when we came here to Keira and Grant.” Kyle began. I nodded. I knew that. “Well, the way we all got through the hell we’d each been through, was to latch onto each other. We had Mom and Dad too, and they are amazing people. They have supported each and every one of us, even when we were horrible little shits to them, but the four of us, we all arrived pretty close to each other and we were all pretty similar in how fucked up and angry we were. Xander was here already and he helped us all. He’s our brother, but he’s always been older and he didn’t go through what we did.

“The four of us, we depend on each other, need each other, especially when things get tough.”

“I know. I w-would never come between you all.” I said quickly, thinking that must be where this was going. Did they know I kissed Cole? Were they mad?

“We know that, Love, that’s not why Kyle’s telling you this. What he’s trying to get to, is that we made a decision a while ago, a decision that we would not separate, that we have to always stick together. We’re better now, stronger, but only because we have each other to count on and to turn to when days get dark and things get too tough. It will be weird to most people. They’ll think we’re odd, maybe even pretty pathetic for needing each other like we do, but we don’t care.”

“People are stupid if they think that. They don’t know what you’ve been through. They don’t know what they would need to do to cope everyday if they had to live your lives.” I said defensively, hating the thought of anyone saying anything against my guys.

“You’re right *Carina*, but people will always judge, just like people were watching the three of us dance tonight, but just like we did tonight, we will ignore them because there is nothing wrong with the way we have chosen to live our lives.” Matt added and I completely agreed. I knew people were glaring our way as we danced that night, but I hadn’t cared, because I was happy and content and safe, and after everything, I felt I was entitled to feel that way for a little while without judgement. I knew nothing I was doing was wrong, or harming anyone, so what did it matter?

“So you will all live together, like get a house together?” I asked.

“That’s the plan once the guys graduate next year. We want to live together and we have also discussed the idea of all having one relationship together, all of us with one girl.” Kyle said, his eyes never leaving mine as he quickly said the last part.

“Can you do that?” I asked. I knew they were worried I was going to freak, but I wasn’t at all. Instead exciting possibilities were running through my mind. Right or wrong, I had equally strong feelings for all four of the guys that surrounded me. I hadn’t really dared admit it to myself because one, I never for one second thought they’d feel anything back, and two, if they did, I could never choose between them. This conversation though, it felt like hope.

“We can. Poly relationships are pretty new as an accepted thing, and people will definitely judge us for it if it happens, but plenty of people have very successful relationships with more than two people, A lot of the ones that exist involve one man and more women, but it works either way.” Kade explained.

“For us, we feel the four of us, with one woman, would work because individually we are pretty broken. It could be hard for a woman to get everything she needs from say, just me, because I don’t have it all to offer. I have issues from my childhood that make it hard for me to deal with emotions and you know how fast I can get angry, not that I would ever hurt

anyone, but I have a short fuse. If we were in a relationship together, when I lose it, or close down because I can't deal with emotions, or go crazy, being way too protective, one of the other guys would be there to step in, for me and for the woman. It's the same for all of us. We all have issues we haven't worked through completely, and individually we are flawed. The four of us together though, we can be everything a woman needs and more." Kyle explained and it made sense, though I had never seen them as flawed. To me they were all wonderfully strong and special guys.

"Do you think you'll find a girl that you could all like though? You're all so different?"

“We were worried about that. All of our discussions were just in theory because we have never met a girl we were all drawn to equally, who liked all of us in return. At least not until you walked into our lives Olivia.” Cole said and my heart leapt into my mouth as I just sat, gobsmacked.

“Don’t freak out on us, Love. It’s fine if you don’t feel the same way. We never intended to bombard you with this right now, but it just felt right.” Kade soothed as his hand landed on my knee.

“I’m not freaking.” I whispered, then laughed when Kade stared me down knowingly. “Ok, I’m freaking a little, but not the way you think. I...I like you guys, all of you. My feelings have been building since the day I met you, but I....I thought it was wrong. I thought there was something wrong with me for liking all of you and I totally never expected any of you to like me back.”

“Why the hell not? You’re beautiful Liv and so damned smart.” Kyle sighed.

“And you’re so strong, and even when you’re scared, you don’t back down.” Matt added, making me tearful.

“And you can speed eat candy faster than anyone I know and, as discovered tonight, you’re a total badass little scrapper.” Cole joked, making me laugh a little through my tears.

“We’ve all fallen for you Olivia, since the moment we saw you. We don’t expect anything from you. We understand after what you’ve been through it will take time for you to be ready, but we’re all here and we’ll wait. We’re yours if you want to try this?” Kade finished.

“And know Liv, that if you don’t want this then it changes nothing. The four of us will always be here for you and this will always be your home.” Kyle added hurriedly.

I took a deep breath to try and calm my tears and just think, but there wasn’t really much to think about. I was pretty sure it would be unconventional and we would be judged for it again and again, but I wasn’t exactly normal anyway. I had feelings

for all of the guys and the thought of any kind of future without the four of them terrified me. They gave me the strength to go forward. They made me brave and strong. I wasn't going to let the opinion of the public take that from me.

"I want to try." I whispered as a smile spread across my face widely. "I think I'm falling for all of you too and I need you, all of you." A sob escaped and instantly I was in the centre of my guys, all four of them holding me from every side and for once, they were happy tears. We all just took a few minutes to be together and it felt so good to have all of them around me. I understood what they meant when they said they needed each other, because in that moment, with the four of them, I felt more whole than I had in a very long time.

"We're all going to do this at your pace, Princess. Things will stay pretty much as they've been, maybe with more hugs though." Kyle said once we pulled apart again. "Everything else will be entirely up to you, ok?"

"Ok." I agreed. I debated whether to be upfront or not. It would be hard to talk about the abuse, but I needed to start off with honesty and I knew it. "I...I've wanted to kiss you guys. I kinda did kiss poor Cole." The guys all looked to Cole who was smirking his ass off.

"Yeah, poor Cole." Kyle grumbled, making me smile.

"I just mean, I must feel comfortable with you guys to an extent because I never would have thought I'd even touch a guy again when I left there, let alone kiss one. I just need you guys to know.....It might take me a long while to.....to get to more than kissing. The Shadow.....the kidnapper, I mean.....he touched me.....hurt me. I d-don't even know if I can ever....."

"Hey, Livy. It's ok, Love. We know what you went through and we all understand. If we never get there, then we'll find other ways to have fun. Just do what feels right and we'll see where we go. No one is ever going to push you. We just want you in our lives, however we can have you." Kade soothed as

he took my hands and rubbed soothing circles with his thumbs on the backs.

“I can live my whole life powered on Livy hugs.” Cole agreed, making me laugh through my sobs.

“You’re ours now Princess. No one will ever hurt you again.” Kyle wrapped his arms around me and squeezed hard as he spoke and I knew he was emotional and trying to process it.

“Does that make you all mine too?” I asked.

“Damn right.” Kyle replied.

They were mine and I was theirs. It sounded pretty amazing to me. I just hoped, in time, I could begin to heal them as they were doing for me.

CHAPTER 14

Four hours later I was laid in bed, tossing and turning, freaking out. The guys were laid out on mattresses on the floor around my bed and I could hear Cole’s slow and heavy breaths and Kyle’s quiet snoring.

We had all fallen asleep watching some action movie Matt picked, well they had. I had laid staring at the ceiling, my thoughts about this new relationship spiralling fast.

My first worry was what would Keira and Grant make of it all? They had brought me into their home as their foster kid. Was it wrong for me to fall for the guys who lived there? Would Keira and Grant be appalled and tell the guys what I was also worrying about, that I wasn’t good enough for one of them, let alone all of them?

I was messed up and barely holding myself together. How could I ever be good enough for the four amazing guys who had been my heroes since the day I met them? They needed someone better, someone whole who could take care of them

in return, not some broken girl who would always drag them down. I hated the realisation, because being with the four of them was all I wanted. When I was with them I felt like there was hope I could be better, braver, stronger. I felt safe and I felt loved. I never wanted to walk away from that, but I wouldn't selfishly take what I wanted if it would hurt the guys in any way. I was pretty sure anyone who got lumbered with me and my issues would end up hurt. I was too fucked up to be what anyone needed, let alone four anyones.

My second worry was that even if I could overcome my fears and just try things with them, how could it possibly work? How could I balance a relationship with four of them and only one of me? Would I take it in turns to spend time with them? Or would we all, always stay together? What about jealousy? I knew it would happen where four alpha males like my guys were concerned, and the absolute last thing I wanted was to ever come between the brothers. The relationship they had was more important than any I could have with them.

The more I lay there thinking, the more I told myself it could never work. I convinced myself it was better to sit them down and tell them I changed my mind, for their sakes. I knew they could hate me, want me to leave, but I would if that was what it would take to protect them. Tears ran down my face at the thought. I never wanted to walk away from them. I wanted them, all of them, needed them with me. I had never felt anything like the way I felt for each of them, but I was no good for them. It was clear to see, they deserved better.

I was becoming too upset at the realisation and I knew I had to get it together before any of them woke and noticed the state I lay in. I needed to be strong, for them if not for myself.

I silently slid from the bed and tiptoed around Cole who was between me and the door. He was sprawled like a starfish on the small twin mattress, his feet hanging off the end and his arms spread off each side. He was way too big for the small mattress and the sight of him made me smile tearfully. My gentle giant. I longed to crawl into the space beside him and

cuddle up, but I knew I couldn't. Instead I stepped over him and crept out into the hall, closing the door silently behind me.

I just needed some space to calm down and compose, so I crept downstairs to the kitchen. Some tea would help.

I flicked on the small over counter lights, not wanting the bright overhead lights blinding me, then filled the kettle and set it to boil. I busied myself getting a cup and the camomile tea, tears creeping down my face the whole time. I was trying to calm down, but all I could think was, why? Why did I have to be taken? Why did I have to be so broken and lost? I had found four amazing guys who I wanted more than anything to be with. That didn't happen. I knew people struggled to find one person to spend their life with. I found four who I was pretty sure I could love for the rest of my life, but I was too fucked up to actually have them! I could never give them what they needed and wanted. They were amazing guys and they deserved everything. I could offer them very little. Hell, I didn't even know if I would ever be able to be intimate with them! What guy would ever want a girl like that? I may have been naive, but even I knew men needed to have sex.

By the time the kettle boiled I was so angry I could barely catch my breath, my chest heaving as I took gasping breaths. I hated my life! I hated what happened to me, how much I had lost, and what I had become. Most of all I hated what I knew I was going to lose because of all of it. My guys!

I took a deeper breath and forced myself to make the tea. I had to calm down before I lost it.

Clumsily, my hands shaking wildly, I grabbed the kettle and moved to fill the cup. When I missed and poured water all over the counter I growled furiously and slammed the kettle down. Anger engulfed me and I needed to release it. I grabbed the cup, half full of boiling water and threw it hard in the sink, from some distance. It smashed with a crash, boiling water splashing all over, but I didn't care. I slid down the cupboard and landed hard on the tile, on my butt. I could barely breathe through the red mist that had descended and I was crying

uncontrollably. *Way to be strong Olivia!* I told myself as I pulled my knees to my chest and just crumbled.

I heard footsteps fast approaching a moment later and cursed myself for making such a scene. I hadn't thought anyone would be able to hear my meltdown from upstairs, but someone obviously had.

"Livvy? What's wrong, Love?" Kade asked as he came rushing into the kitchen. I sobbed, relieved to have him close, and angry he had to witness me falling apart once again. What was wrong with me? Why couldn't I just get it together? Why couldn't I be strong, for the guys, if not for myself?

I felt Kade's thigh brush the side of my leg as he sat down on the tile beside me and pulled me into his side for a hug. I went eagerly, needing him, and grabbed at his shirt as I hid my sobbing face in his soft t-shirt. For a few minutes he just sat silently, holding me. It was exactly what I needed, while at the same time just making things worse, because the thought of turning them away and never having their comfort again was terrifying.

"Come on now Livvy. Talk to me. You're worrying me." Kade whispered after a while.

I laughed bitterly at his words. "That's just it." I commented, then cried harder.

"Love, you're not making any sense. Take a breath and talk to me. Whatever it is, we can fix it."

Knowing I needed to just get it out I took a deep breath and forced myself to push up and away from him.

"I'm not good enough Kade."

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"This, us! All of us! It can't work. You guys need someone better than me. You deserve someone who hasn't been broken into a million tiny little fucking pieces!" I spat between gasps for breath. The anger coursing through me was like a vice squeezing my chest and my head, making me feel like I would

combust eventually. I had never felt anything like it and it terrified me.

“What on earth has brought this on? I thought we all talked about this?”

“We did and you made it all seem s-so simple, but it’s not, is it? I can n-ever be what you and the guys need.....I can never be enough. I’m a trainwreck! I can’t even make fucking tea without a freak out! What do you think will happen when you guys want more.....want sex? I probably won’t even be able to give you that! I can’t give you anything!.....He broke me Kade, again and again. There’s nothing left of me intact. I..... I want you guys, I love you all and more than anything I want the happiness we could have had, but I can’t! I can’t be the girl you need. I’m too much of a mess.....too fucked up!” I was yelling at him, ranting and completely out of control as I laid all of my fears out. By the end my voice was raw and the words were rough and hoarse. Just seeing it as another sign of how pathetic I was, I broke into sobs again and hid my face in my knees.

I don’t know how I expected Kade to react. Maybe yell back at me, or tell me I was being an idiot. Maybe even agree and walk away, but he didn’t do any of those things. He just got to his feet silently and then bent down and lifted me into his arms. I glanced up from where he held me, curled up, against his chest, confused about his reaction. He just kissed my head and carried on walking, carrying me up the stairs and toward my room.

He opened the door and walked in, climbing over Cole and taking me back to the bed. He laid me down in the middle and turned away. I was sure he had realised I was right and was going to walk away, sick to death of me being such a disaster. I curled into myself, in a foetal position and just cried harder. I’d done it now. I would be alone for the rest of my miserable life and it was my own damn fault.

Then I felt strong arms around my waist and a warm body at my back. I looked up and found Kyle holding me tightly.

“I’ve got you Princess, and I am never letting you go.” He whispered.

Then the bed dipped in front of me and I turned as Cole laid down beside me and wriggled his arm beneath my head. Pulling me against him, Kyle keeping his tight hold on me too.

“You belong with us, Babygirl. We’re not letting you psych yourself out of this. We love you.” Cole told me, then he kissed my temple and just laid with me quietly.

Matt came next, laying on his side beside Cole and looking over to me with his lazy smile. He was all sleep mussed and he looked so cute.

“I love you *Carina*, and I need you. We all do. You’re a big part we all were missing and I feel so much more whole since I found you. You’re not going anywhere, *Mi Vida*.” He reached across and his hand landed on my hip, just below Kyle’s arms.

Kade came last, laying on the bed behind Kyle and propping his head on his elbow as he reached across and took my hand.

“We know you’re scared Love, but we’re all broken too. We have been for a long time, but since you came into our lives we feel some of those broken pieces starting to come together. We all want to be better for you, because of you. You said you’re not good enough for us, but that is not true. It’s us who will never be good enough for you. We can never be whole men, Livy. We were all broken too badly to be fixed completely and I think that’s why we’re all drawn together, because you’ve been shattered too. We’re all a little fucked up, but maybe together we can mend our pieces enough to find some peace and happiness, don’t you think?” He asked quietly.

“You guys are strong though. You have good lives..... and y-you got over what you went through. I can’t keep it together for two minutes! You all shouldn’t have to deal with that. You can do s-so much better.” I whimpered. I understood what he was saying. At some point they had all been messed up, as I was, but they had healed. They had each other, and their family. They weren’t constantly in meltdown like I was. They

were strong, and my fear was that if I let them be close, my mess would drag them back down the dark pit I was stuck in.

“We’re not strong Liv,” Kyle said as he squeezed me tighter. “We’re all like you, just clinging onto the edge and trying hard to hold on. We’ve just had longer to deal with our shit, so we can hide it better. We all have times when it becomes too much and we lose it, but we know what to expect from each other and we handle it. It’s why we need to stick together, why we need each other so much.”

“Since you’ve been here though, we’ve all been better, calmer. Kyle has smiled more since you arrived than I have ever fucking seen, and Matt hasn’t woke me yelling in his sleep once. Kade has been home so much more, not needing to hide in his work, and I am starting to get seriously out of shape because I have stopped spending every minute in the gym working through my shit.” Cole pouted, making me smile.

“Yeah, “ I laughed through my tears. “ I noticed how out of shape you were looking earlier.” He was so full of crap!

“He’s right *Carina*, we’re all better with you here. If you don’t want this, don’t want us, then tell us now and we can go back to how things were, but if you’re just pushing us away because you’re scared, then don’t. None of us know what will happen, but we all want you, want this. We love you and if you feel the same, I really think we can all heal each other, and find some version of a happy ending.” Matt’s eyes were locked on mine and I couldn’t look away as he leant over Cole to speak. It was like he was looking into my soul again, seeing my fears and tearing them away.

“I don’t want to hurt you guys. I do love you, and more than anything I want to protect you all.”

“Then be with us. Nothing would make us happier than to call you ours. The only way you could hurt us now, is if you walked away without giving us a chance.” Kyle said flatly, always the down to business one.

“Like Matt said, no one knows how things will go, but we love you Olivia, and you love us. We all have a bond that we can’t deny. I believe that is a very solid foundation to build something strong and beautiful.” Kade agreed.

“I want that. I want everything you guys are offering me. I’m just scared that I will never be enough for you all. I don’t want you to have to spend your lives worrying about me, especially when I may not even be able to offer you what you need in return.” I sighed honestly.

“You just don’t realise how special you are Livy, but that’s ok. We will just have to work hard to show you.” Cole began as his hand gently caressed my cheek.

“You need to stop worrying about what you can and can’t offer us. We’re not in a relationship with you to trade favours. We love you and we will take whatever you have to give. We don’t care about sex! Of course it would be amazing if we can get there some day, but if we can’t, then we’ll find other things we can enjoy together. There are a ton of ways to be intimate without us ever having to do the things you’re uncomfortable with. All we care about is being with you. Will we worry about you and try to take care of you? Yes, of course, but Livy we do that with everyone we care for, including each other. It’s not a hardship for us to protect and care for you, it’s an honour, one we hope we can spend the rest of our lives doing, if you want us there.” Kade said passionately. I let out a sob as I realised I couldn’t argue with them. I wanted everything they said and so much more. I couldn’t walk away. I was in too deep. I loved them all and without them I saw no future worth living.

“I w-want you there.” I whimpered when I saw the worry on their faces. “I want all of you there, and everything y-you just said. I love you guys.”

They all squeezed where their hands touched me and whispered that they loved me too. It made me feel a calmness that I hadn’t felt before, a peace. I knew surrounded by them I

was safe. I would just have to fight to be stronger for them in return.

“You need to come to us Liv, when your thoughts get dark like tonight. You need to tell us and let us help you. If Kade hadn’t been downstairs working, you’d have been down there alone, hurting and scared. I hate that. It fucking kills me.” Kyle broke the silence after a few minutes.

“He’s right, Love. We’re here for you and we want to help you, so come to us, yeah?” Kade agreed.

“I’ll try.” I agreed. “I scared myself tonight. I got so angry. My chest got tight and I.....I thought I might explode. I’ve never felt like that.”

“It’s a part of the process of dealing with everything. It probably won’t be the last time you feel like that.” Cole whispered. His hand was still caressing my cheek and it felt so soothing. “We all have similar issues. It’s why Dad got us into working out. It helps when you’re angry, to just pound a punch bag or run it out on the treadmill.”

“Probably should try that instead of throwing cups of tea around.” I muttered more to myself.

“I’ll help you get started if you want to try the gym.” Cole offered.

“When your back has healed up.” Kyle added in his best ‘Dad’ tone.

“It’s just bruising Kyle.” I countered. “I’m ok.”

“You need to let it heal first. No arguments. Cole won’t be in the gym for a while anyway with his ribs.”

“It’s just bruising Kyle. I’m fine.” Cole said, repeating my argument in a squeaky voice I assumed was supposed to be mine.

I hit out at him, avoiding his side, landing a pathetic slap on his solid bicep.

“I do not sound like that!” I laughed.

“Ow Brains! That hurt!” Cole mocked and I hit him again and then laughed. He was such a dork!

“I think we should all probably get some sleep. It’s almost morning.” Kade wisely suggested.

“Will you stay here, with me?” I asked nervously. We were all way too squished together and I knew Matt and Kade must have been close to the edges, but I needed them close.

“We’re not going anywhere, Princess.” Kyle whispered, his breath brushing over my ear and giving me goosebumps.

“Try and sleep now, Babygirl. We got you.” Cole added.

It didn’t take long for me to drift off, not with them all holding me. I had never felt safer or slept better.

KADE

My cell phone vibrating in the pocket of my lounge pants startled me awake and almost had me rolling backwards off the tiny space I had on the edge of Livy’s bed.

It had been an emotional night. I knew as soon as I found Livy in a state in the kitchen, that she needed all of us to reassure her and I had been right. We had talked her off of the ledge and she seemed settled now, fast asleep between Kyle and Cole.

I was so fucking happy she agreed to try this unconventional relationship with us all. I had fallen for her so fast, and while I knew that may worry some people, it didn’t concern me because I knew my feelings were true. Matt had put it perfectly, she was a huge piece I hadn’t even realised I was missing. Now that Olivia sized piece was where it should be, I felt like all of my other broken pieces were finding ways to fit in too. I’d never be whole, but I felt like she was going to get me closer than I ever expected to be.

Not wanting to wake any of them I carefully slid from the bed and hurried into the hall to pick up the call. It was the Chief, and I knew him calling before first light was not going to mean anything good.

“Chief.” I answered drowsily.

“Maxwell, we’ve got another body and another cryptic fucking message. I need you to get to the crime scene and get your genius brother working on this code shit!” Chief was pissed, and so was I. Another innocent person lay dead because someone on the surveillance team at that motel fucked up. This fucking murdering scumbag should already be locked up!

“Send me the address and I’ll head over. Where’s the message? Another letter?” I asked tiredly. I’d barely slept an hour and I was already exhausted. It was going to be a long fucking day!

“Not this time. Head to the scene and you’ll see. I have a meeting first thing with the superintendent. I’ll meet you there after. We need to stop this fucking maniac Kade. The Mayor is right up my ass on this one.”

“We will.” I agreed, then hung up. I took a deep breath and just took a moment. Another fucking body, and worse, another message I would likely have to get Olivia involved with. I hated mixing her up in all of this shit, but so far she was the only one who had been able to solve the first one. I had no idea if she was some kind of math prodigy or something, but she was really fucking smart and even though I knew I shouldn’t, I would ask her to look at the message if it looked any thing like the last one. I had to do all I could to protect the public. I’d just have to make sure I protected my girl too.

Fuck, I loved being able to call her that! Even on a shit morning like that one, having her in my life could make me smile.

“What the fuck?” I gasped when I walked into the motel room of a rundown shithole just outside Cicero.

“Weird huh?” One of the techs who was working the scene asked from where they stood across the room.

The motel room was pretty standard, a queen size bed in the centre, two nightstands and a table with two beat up chairs in the corner. The place looked like it hadn't been updated since the eighties, the walls yellow and flaking, and the whole place reeking of cigarettes and death.

The curtains of the room had been drawn, and laid in the centre of the bed, just like the others was a young girl, no older than mid twenties. She had bright blonde hair and her eyes were closed like she was sleeping. She was tucked under the comforter, which was new, since the other bodies had simply been on top, and there were no outward signs of cause of death, though I knew if I pulled the comforter back, I would likely find multiple stab wounds, like the others.

“We ID the girl yet?” I asked as I stepped in further.

“Christine Cook. She was a first year medical student. Parents reported her missing when she missed a planned meal two days ago. 24 years old.”

“Witnesses? Surveillance footage? Anything to help us get this fucker?” I asked angrily.

“Patrols are canvassing, but nothing so far. In this neighbourhood, even if anyone did see anything, they won't talk.” I knew that was true. In the tougher neighbourhoods, people avoided the police at all costs and never told us a damned thing.

“What about the message? That what you're working on?” I asked, nodding to the notebook he was scribbling in.

“Yeah, but it's a mess.” He shook his head despairingly and my heart started to pound harder, knowing this would be like the letter, only something Olivia could solve.

I understood why the tech was despairing. The message was on the walls this time, all four of the walls, written in what looked like black marker. All around the top of the room were

three neat lines of numbers, letters and symbols, each row about an inch high and all written in perfectly straight lines.

Below that were drawings of shapes with numbers all around their perimeters, and groups of random squares, made up of tiny little numbers, letters and symbols. These shapes and groups of squares filled the entirety of the four walls from below the three lines, right down to the floor. I spun around, taking it all in and wondered how long it had taken the fucker to do it all. He must have used a fucking ruler to get all of the lines on the shapes so perfectly straight, I mused. What kind of psycho was he, to kill the poor innocent girl, then stay with her body to do all of this shit on the walls? I knew I needed to do whatever it took to stop him from taking another innocent life, but the thought of mixing Olivia up with the psycho terrified me.

I feared I had little choice though. Innocent lives depended on her math skills at that time.

OLIVIA

“Watcha doing *Chica*?” Matt asked as he plopped down next to me on the sofa in the lounge. I hadn’t ended up getting much sleep the previous night, with all of my drama, and I was tired. I’d had a lazy morning with Cole and Matt, watching movies in the media room, but after we ate lunch I decided I needed to find something else to do. I was bored just watching a screen and my mind had started to wander to places I really didn’t want it to.

“Some math equations Cole gave me. He searched the internet for the most complicated ones he could find.” They weren’t actually that complicated and I had pretty easily worked through most of them already, in barely an hour, but they were keeping my brain busy, which was all I needed.

“I still can’t believe you do math for fun.” He laughed.

“I like to keep my mind busy. It helps.” I knew he would understand what I meant by that. He nodded.

“Rough day huh?” He asked and I nodded in reply, then felt bad.

“I’m happy too, about us of course.” I added, hurriedly, and I was so happy to have them all as mine and to be theirs. It made me feel more content than I remembered feeling in a long time, if ever. “Just after that fight and then me freaking last night, it brought a lot of the bad stuff to the surface. That and the fact I didn’t really sleep, I’m just struggling a little. I’m ok though. I just need to be busy.”

“You want to talk things through with me? It might help?” He offered, kindly.

“Thanks, but not today. I’m too tired to try and deal with any of it today.”

“I understand. How about I make you some tea and get you some of those cookies I made. I hid some away from Cole for you.” He laughed.

“That sounds amazing Matt. Thank you.” Matt’s baking was one of the best remedies for a crappy day and I knew it. The man should be a Michelin starred pastry chef.

“Ok *Carina*, sit tight. I won’t be long.” He stood, leant in to kiss my cheek, then dashed off toward the kitchen.

I gathered the multiple lined pages I had been working out on, into a pile and dumped them on the coffee table, needing a break.

The silence of the room was too much so I flicked the TV on and found a daytime programme to blindly have in the background. The noise helped me relax and I laid back with my head rested on the back of the sofa and closed my eyes. I wanted to sleep, but I also knew with the thoughts and images running through my mind, it wasn’t a good idea.

After a few minutes Matt came back with two cups of green tea and a plate of sugar cookies he had made the day before.

We enjoyed the treats together in companionable silence, then he simply wrapped me in his arms and let me snuggle into him.

“You should close your eyes and rest a while. You’re too pale today.” Matt encouraged, after a while.

“I’m ok, just tired.” I sighed.

“Then take a nap. I’ll stay right here with you.” I looked up and took in his handsome face, that sexy smile on his face. He was everything I never knew I needed and so much more.

“How do you always know what I need?” I asked as I ran a hand over his slightly stubbled cheek.

“I don’t *Carina*. I just try to do what I can to take care of you.”

“Well thank you.....for taking care of me.”

“Always. Now just rest. I’ve got you.”

I did as he suggested, too tired to protest and sure I would feel safe enough to push back the darkness, in his arms. As soon as my eyes closed I started to drift into sleep.

“Olivia?” Kade’s yell as the front door slammed, had me startling awake violently.

“It’s ok *Carina*.” Matt hurried to soothe me, and as soon as I realised he still held me, I took a breath and tried to relax a little.

“Olivia?” Kade called again as he strode into the lounge looking stressed and exhausted.

“Kade! Shut the hell up. I literally just got her to try and rest and you woke her!” Matt snapped.

“It’s ok Matt.” I pushed up from the sofa to go to Kade. Something was wrong and I was worried about him working at all when he looked so tired. I knew he went out far too early that morning, because I’d woken up when he left the bedroom in the early hours.

“Shit! I’m sorry. I didn’t think.” Kade ran a hand through his wild hair as he spoke and I picked up on his anxiety.

“It’s fine.” I hurried to assure him as I stopped before him, looking up the great distance to his face, not failing to appreciate his toned abs and chest beneath his shirt as I moved past them. “What’s wrong?”

“There’s been another body found.” He replied. “The same killer.”

“That’s awful Kade. I’m sorry.” I whispered as I stepped forward, needing to comfort him. I knew he took the weight of every crime he handled heavily on his own shoulders. I wrapped my arms around his waist and held him as tight as I could.

“I thought Livy gave you dates and locations of the next four murders?” Matt asked.

“Yeah, she did, but I think when he found out we deciphered that message and were onto him, he changed his plans. He never expected anyone to understand that message. He thought he was smarter than all of us when he sent it.”

“But he wasn’t. Not smarter than Livy anyway.” Matt smiled at me and I blushed at his compliment.

“What now then? Can you stop him this time?” I asked as I pulled back from Kade’s arms enough to look up at him.

“Maybe.” Kade sighed as he sat on the sofa and buried his face in his hands, rubbing hard at his eyes with the heels of his hands.

“Kade? What is it man? Just talk to us.” Matt implored as he too looked to his brother with concern.

I sat down beside him and rubbed a hand up and down his back, trying to calm him. Eventually he looked up at me and the worry and fear in his eyes panicked me.

“There was another message.” He sighed. “You don’t have to get involved again, Love. I hate even asking you.” He hurried to add.

“Can your techs unravel it this time?” I asked, already knowing the answer. The math in the last message had been like nothing I had seen before. I didn’t understand why, but it had just spoken to me and I had been able to solve it pretty easily, but maybe that was just because I was made as dark and twisted by my time in captivity, as the killer. Could that be true?

“No. So far they have nothing. This message is really different from the last. It was left at the crime scene.”

“But if I can solve it.....work out what it says, you think it will help you stop him, right?”

“I’m hoping so, yes.” Kade nodded and I knew from the tense expression on his face, he hated me having to be involved at all.

“Then I need to try. Do you have it with you?” I asked confidently. I needed to do this, for Kade and for the next innocent victim. If there was some way to stop it all then I had to try.

“I have photos of it. On my laptop.”

“Photos?”

“It was all over the walls of the crime scene. I tried to photograph just the walls for you, but there are a few where the body is partly visible. I would have waited until they moved it, but I wanted to get started incase the next murder is soon.”

“Jesus. You can’t show her crime scene pictures Kade! What are you thinking?” Matt gasped.

“No! It’s fine. I can handle it. I need to solve this as soon as possible. Show me Kade.”

Kade studied my face hard, as if trying to decide if I could actually handle it all. He obviously saw whatever he needed to in my determined look, because he nodded and stood, leaving the room.

“Kade! I mean it! You can’t do this. It’s too much for her after what she’s been through!” Matt yelled as he too jumped up and followed Kade out of the room.

I took a moment just to sit and breathe. I told myself whatever was in those photos I needed to keep it together long enough to solve the math and help Kade stop this crazy from killing more innocent people. It was just photos. How much could a picture really affect me when I had spent eight years of my life living something similar for real?

Kade returned a few minutes later, followed not just by Matt, but now Kyle too.

“I get it bro, you need answers, but just give the techs a little longer first. They could solve it and Liv never needs to be involved.” Kyle argued.

“They won’t solve it Ky! They couldn’t last time and this is worse, more complicated. I hate mixing her up in this, but I need this solved, to stop this fucker and I don’t know where else to turn!” Kade snapped and more than anything I wanted to calm his fear and indecision.

“Kyle, it’s fine. I can deal with a few pictures. Trust me, after what I’ve been through blood is not an issue for me. I have a strong stomach.” I cut in as loud as I could, needing all of them to hear me.

“I know you’re strong *Carina*, but you’re also tired and struggling today. You told me yourself. We don’t want you having an anxiety attack and draining yourself even more. You’re not strong enough physically to deal with that.” Matt was right before me as he finished up, holding both of my hands in his as he looked at me imploringly, I understood his fears. He was right, I was a mess that day, even more than usual, and there was a possibility the photos would trigger my dark memories, but none of it mattered. I wasn’t important. There were innocent people facing a brutal death if I didn’t woman up and do what Kade needed me to do.

“I know you guys are worried, but I have to do this. Nothing you say will change my mind, so let’s stop wasting time and just get it done.” I said firmly, ending the debate completely. There wasn’t time. I sat back down and nodded to Kade when he looked unsure. He hesitated for just a moment before he hurried over and sat beside me.

“If this is too much, you have to tell me Love. I’ll find another way.” He whispered as his laptop fired up.

“What other way?” I knew there was no alternative. If there was, he wouldn’t be there with me.

“I don’t know, but it doesn’t matter. You come first. If this is going to hurt you in any way, then I will end your involvement.”

“You won’t need to do that Kade. I can deal with this.” I pushed as much confidence into my voice as I could.

“Princess....” Kyle started, but I stopped him with a glare.

“No Kyle. Enough now. I’m not as fragile as you all think. You have to just let me get on with this now.” I stared him down hard, until he eventually gave in and nodded just once. He and Matt then moved to the other sofa and took seats opposite where Kade and I were looking at the laptop.

All I could think as Kade started loading up the images was, *I can do this, I can do this. I have to do this.* I really hoped I was right.

CHAPTER 15

COLE

It was almost one AM and the four of us were all sitting in the media room, pretending to watch a movie, but all really worried sick about Olivia who worked in the office next door.

I had found out about the situation when I went to find her after my afternoon workout. Matt had filled me in and ranted about how mad he was with Kade for showing her the images at all. I got it, I didn't like it either, but Kade was a police detective. He had a duty to do all he could to protect the public. He needed Olivia's brain to stop this new killer, and if it was the only way, he had little choice but to ask her. I knew for Kade to involve her as he had, he must have been desperate.

From what Kyle and Kade had told me, she had reacted well when she looked through the images, blocking out the gruesome parts and focusing on what she needed to, the message. She had disappeared into the office with the laptop just before 2PM and now, eleven hours later she was still holed up, having only left once in that whole time, for two minutes to pee. We had all been in, trying to persuade her to take a break, even Grant trying when we all sat for dinner, but there was no moving her.

When I had been in, she had been so deep in whatever she was working on, it took me a good five minutes just to gain her attention. It was like she got sucked into the numbers she was so focussed on, pulling herself away from reality. It was kind of scary to see, like she wasn't really there anymore. We wanted to pull her away and make her sleep. Kyle had been in

at ten and tried being more pushy, demanding she got to bed and rest, but she had flat out refused and when Kyle said he'd carry her, she told him she'd fight him all the way, and come back to the office as soon as she could.

We knew she wasn't bluffing. The determination was clear to see in her eyes, so we had let her be, staying close so we could constantly check on her and get her to bed when she inevitably crashed. So far though, despite the fact she was obviously wiped out, she showed no sign of slowing down. She was hunched over that desk, frantically writing sheet after sheet of numbers and flicking between them and the images on the laptop.

"This is crazy. We need to stop her. She's been working non stop for eleven fucking hours!" Kyle growled

"How? You can't drag her away screaming and I have a feeling that's what it will take." I said, knowing how stubborn Livy could be.

"She's gonna wind up making herself sick!"

"We have to let her be. She's been eating and drinking what we took her. She'll just drop off eventually when the exhaustion gets too much. All we can do is wait. Even Mom and Dad said it's best to leave her to it."

"One more hour!" Kyle declared. "One more hour and she's getting some sleep. Whether she wants to or fucking not!"

A loud cry, followed by a thud had me jumping awake. I looked around and realised I was still in the media room. We all were and judging by the three other confused faces, we all fell asleep.

"What time is it?" Kyle barked.

"Seven AM. We fell asleep." Matt answered. We all looked at each other then and it sank in.

"Livy!" I cried as I leapt up. The others were Right behind me. I reached the office door first and opened it quietly, hoping she

was sleeping, but she wasn't. She was slumped over the desk, her head in her hands on the top and she was crying. There was one of Dad's paperweights on the floor by the door, and I realised that must have been the thud. She'd thrown it down in anger.

"Livy? You ok, beautiful?" I asked quietly. I approached her and crouched at her side. She was crying so hard her shoulders shook violently and I placed a hand on her back, desperate to comfort her in some way.

"I...I c-can't do it Cole!" She cried between sobs.

"You're exhausted, Love. You need to rest." Kade said. They were all standing around her, Kade behind me and Matt and Kyle at her other side. We all knew we had seriously fucked up falling asleep and leaving her to get in this state.

"I c-can't Kade! I got the f-first section. It's a date." She finally looked up and terrified me by how pale and exhausted she looked. Her eyes were red and swollen and she was squinting, like her eyes hurt. "It's t-ommorrow. He has something p-planned for tomorrow, and I can't....don't know anymore to stop it."

"Ok, enough now." Kade said firmly as he stepped forward and slammed his laptop shut. "I said I'd end it, if it hurt you, and it's hurting you Livy. No more looking at this until you've had something to eat and drink and slept for at least a few hours. You can't carry on like this." He started trying to gather the pages Livy had scattered all over the desk in piles, covered in scrawls, But she slammed her hands down on top of them.

"No! We could have less than twenty four hours Kade! I have to solve this now!" She cried, her voice breaking into a croak half way through, just another sign of her exhaustion.

"I don't care, Livy, about this , about tomorrow, about anything or anyone except you right now!" Kade barked and I knew it was because he was worried sick about the manic state she was in, we all were. "You're going to go up to your room with Cole and let him help you get cleaned up and changed.

Matt's going to bring you something to eat and drink and then we will all sit with you while you close your eyes and get some damned sleep." He used his 'cop' voice and it worked, Livy released the pages under her hands and sat back quietly sobbing. Thank God, she'd given in.

"Fine." She whimpered. "But please don't move anything Kade. I'm coming right back as soon as I sleep, to figure this out."

"No way!" Kyle cut in, sounding angry, but I knew it was really because of his worry for her.

"Yes I am and none of you will stop me or I swear to God I will run out of this house and figure it all out in peace somewhere, alone!" Livy threw back, with a fierceness I had never seen from her.

"Liv...." Kyle tried to be softer, but she stood, scowling at him and stopping him instantly.

"Some poor innocent person is going to be murdered Kyle, sometime tomorrow. Somebody's daughter or sister, or husband or father. I can stop it. If I can work this out Kade and the police can catch him so no one else has to suffer because of this monster. I am not giving up on that, no matter what you do. I *will* find a way to work this out and give Kade what he needs." I saw the fire in her eyes and knew for sure she meant every word. I considered us lucky that she had agreed to Kade's demands to rest for a while. I figured we should be grateful and just take what we could get. There was no way she was backing down any further.

"Come on, Brains. Kade's going to leave everything where it is, and after you rest, you can come back and try for a few more hours, ok?" I offered her a hand and she took it, her own shaking violently. She looked to Kade and he nodded his agreement.

"I'll make you some breakfast and bring it up with some tea." Matt told her, then headed out.

“I will solve this in time, Kade.” Livy said as she walked past him.

“I know you will, Love, but please, just turn that crazy brain of yours off for a few hours, and rest. We have time.”

She just nodded and I pulled her shaking body into my side, knowing she was likely feeling unsteady. She grabbed handfuls of my t-shirt and held onto me tightly. I knew it was a terrible thing to think when she was clearly in a bad way, but it felt so damned good to have her need me as she did in that moment, and she felt so good against me too, like she fit there just perfectly. I knew no matter what, I would never want to let her go.

OLIVIA

I jumped awake with a start. I looked at the clock beside my bed and saw it was almost two PM. I had slept for far too long! I hadn't even thought I would be able to sleep, my mind running wild with all of the numbers, trying to work out that damned message, but I had eventually dropped off in Kyle's arms.

He had been a mess, worried and stressing himself out, getting angrier and angrier as he stood watching me eat the omelette Matt had cooked for me. By the time I finished, he was twitchy, constantly running a hand through his hair and unable to stand still. I knew he was beating himself up in some way. I had put an end to it by asking him to lie with me. As soon as he wrapped his arms around me he seemed to settle, and as a result, the others, who were all with me in my room, settled too. I had drifted off quickly and dreamed about the numbers, over and over until I jumped awake with a realisation.

I looked around and found Kyle asleep on the bed beside me. Matt and Cole were propped up against each other against the

door, obviously not trusting me to stay in the room. I rolled my eyes and continued my search.

Kade was sitting at my desk, hunched over some paperwork and working hard, as always.

“Kade?” I spoke softly, trying not to wake the others, but Kyle jumped awake instantly beside me.

“Hey Love. How are you feeling?” Kade asked as he stood and strode toward me in that cocky way he always moved. His confidence was very sexy.

“I figured it out. I’m missing some numbers. I need to see the crime scene.” It had come to me as I ran and reran the numbers in my head. I was missing some key parts of the equations, which was why I couldn’t work them out. My brain had been too tired to work it out before.

“Not happening Livy. I can send the techs back. They’ll look for any parts of the message we missed.”

“They won’t find them. I think it has to do with the shapes he drew. They don’t mean anything to the equations so far, but he must have put them there for a reason. I need to see them Kade, I need it all in front of me.”

“You cannot handle seeing that Liv.” Kyle argued from my other side and again I rolled my eyes. I was sick of them all thinking I was so fucking fragile. I had lived through hell. I could handle more than they realised.

“Yes I can and I have to. I’m going to get dressed and then we’re going, Kade. That’s final. I will stop this monster.” I failed to stop my own, or at least I think I did, but I wouldn’t fail this time. No one else would suffer as those people he already killed had. I would not let it happen.

I jumped out of bed with a new energy and hurried to grab clothes from the closet. Time to be as strong as I knew I could be and do something productive.

An hour later Kade and I were in his SUV, on our way to the crime scene. The guys had all wanted to come, but Kade told them he couldn't have them all tramping over an active crime scene. Kyle had been most pissed, but they all agreed in the end.

I knew none of them were happy about me doing this, but I needed to, and they knew it, so they didn't try to talk me out of it further.

"This motel room isn't pretty Livy. You need to prepare yourself. The body has obviously been removed, but there will be blood and there are signs of a struggle." Kade explained as he glanced from the road to me a few times.

"I'm not expecting kittens and Daisies." I said sarcastically and he looked over to me with surprise. "You need to remember I lived in a torture chamber for eight years Kade. I laid in my own blood night after night. I'm not squeamish. No one who went through what I did, could be. I can handle whatever I'm about to see. I don't care as long as I can do what needs to be done to catch this monster."

"I fucking hate what you've had to endure, Love. I wish there was something I could do to change it all." Kade sighed as he reached over and took my hand. "I will catch them though, this guy, and the one who hurt you. I'll make sure they never hurt anyone else ever again,"

"I know you will." I had every faith in him, in all my guys. "Have you or Kyle found anything yet.....about The Shadow?" I had wanted to ask for days, but had also been scared to hear the answer. If they told me they'd tracked him to the city I'd never sleep, terrified he was coming for me again.

"Kyle's team found a tiny community who had a guy coming down from the mountains for supplies. He meets the description and the habits seem to match what you described, same day and time every week. Kyle has guys up there following the lead, but the suspicious guy hasn't been seen

since you were found. He could have fled.” Kade hurried to add the last sentence and I knew what he was thinking.

“Or I could have killed him?” I asked, my voice shaking at the thought I could have actually ended a life, even that evil monster.

“We don’t know, but even if you did, you had no choice Livy. It was self defense. You did what you had to do to get out of there. Anyone in your place would have done the same, if that’s what happened.”

“Why can’t I just remember?” It was so frustrating. Xander had said I likely blocked out the trauma, but what could have happened that was worse than all of the horror I could remember? I need to know what happened, what I did, but I couldn’t, no matter how hard I tried. There was just a blackness where those days should be.

“Your brain has blocked it from you to protect you. I for one, don’t ever want you to have to remember Love. You have enough nightmares.”

“I just need to know if he’s still out there Kade. I need to know if he’s coming for me again.” I sighed.

“He’s not, because none of us will let that happen. You’re safe now. We will never let anyone take you from us.” Kade parked the car in the lot of a disgustingly shabby looking motel, just off of the highway. There was a police cruiser in the lot too and one of the rooms had crime scene tape across the doorway.

“You ready for this?” Kade asked as I stared at that room out of the window.

“As I’m ever gonna be.” I sighed as I turned to him and tried to smile. I was getting nervous that all my bravado would leave me the second I walked in there.

“If you need to take a break, you just give me the nod and I’ll get you out of there.” He told me. The concern for me, in those beautiful amber eyes made me feel stronger. I could do this if he was with me. I could be brave with my guys at my side.

“Let’s go.” I nodded to assure him I was ready. He nodded once too, and then got out of the car. He came to my side to help me down the huge drop from his raised car and we walked hand in hand toward the room.

A uniformed officer approached us from the cruiser, but Kade flashed his badge and we were waved to continue.

Kade opened the door and the first thing to hit me was the smell. It was a mix of stale cigarettes, damp, blood and rot. I gagged and stepped back into the air to try and breathe. It was a bad smell, but it wasn’t the severity of it that was sending me into a tailspin, it was how similar, except the cigarette smell, it was to the smell I lived with in *The Darkness*, except that had been my blood, and my rotting open wounds.

“Are you ok?” Kade asked as he came to me. I took a deep breath and nodded. I had to get it together. There wasn’t time to freak out. I could do that later. “Try not to breathe through your nose. It helps.” He suggested.

I nodded again and took his hand again as we stepped into the dated, shabby room.

The bed in the centre was covered in blood stained sheets, and there was an overturned nightstand, showing this victim had tried to fight. I swallowed the lump rising in my throat and looked away. I told myself to focus on the maths, to do what I had to do and shut my brain off to all else.

I reached into the messenger bag I had borrowed from Matt and pulled out the notepad and pen I brought. I looked to the wall over the bed first, as it seemed to be the starting point to everything, and I started scribbling. Everything else in the room disappeared for me, the smell, the blood, the horror. It was all gone and all I saw was the Math.

I took out the measuring tape I had brought and started to work with the huge shapes drawn on the walls perfectly. I forgot Kade was beside me, forgot everything except the task at hand.

At some point I felt Kade take the bag from across my body so I could work without it restricting me, but I barely even registered that. If he spoke to me I didn't hear a word. I started working the complicated equations with new data. I used the dimensions of the shapes, then tried the area of them, neither of which seemed to fit.

I got frustrated and looked over the room again. I tried to get in the killer's head. What mattered to him? Where would the centre of his problem lie? Then I realised it was the body. That was the centre of his twisted problems scrawled on the wall.

"Kade?" I snapped from my trance and looked around, only to find him right at my side.

"Are you ok? You've been working for hours." Kade asked with concern. I looked to the filthy window and saw the sun beginning to set outside. I had been so lost in what I was doing I never even realised how much time had passed.

"You stayed with me the whole time?" I asked, shocked as I looked back to the beautiful man at my side.

"I'm not leaving you in here alone, Love." He smiled a little and it warmed my frozen body just to see it.

"I think I finally worked out what the last numbers are. I need to see photos of the body. Do you have them?" I asked.

"Are you sure? They're gruesome."

"I'm sure. Everything in here comes from the centre, and I think the body, the person he killed, is this guy's centre point." I tried to explain. It was hard for me to make sense, because I couldn't really explain how I understood this crazy guy's math, I just did.

"Come and sit in the car for a few minutes while I get them on my laptop. You need a break and the guys need to hear from us. They'll be freaking out." He took my hand and led me out before I could disagree.

We sat in the front of his car and Kade handed me a bottle of water and a protein bar, with a firm look that said I wasn't

doing anything until they were gone. I wasn't really hungry, but the water felt good on my parched throat. I checked my cell as Kade fired up his laptop, laughing when I found twelve text messages, ten from the guys, one from Xander checking in, and one from Grant who had found out where I was when he got home and was concerned.

I replied to Grant that I was fine and getting close to cracking it, then to xander, assuring him I was good and happily agreeing to lunch with him and Simon later that week. Then I sent a group text to the guys.

Olivia: Stop freaking out guys! I'm fine. Just taking a break, then I'm sure I can finish up. Be home soon. Love you all xxx

It felt weird to write that I loved them, but I did and I didn't see the sense in not writing it because I was unsure, *Screw it*, I thought. *I love them and I want them to know.*

I received replies from each of them, various versions of don't work too hard, and all three of them telling me they loved me too. I felt more cared for than I ever thought possible and I couldn't wait for this whole thing to be over so i could just get back to them all.

I ate half of the protein bar and quickly shoved the other half in my jacket pocket, then turned to Kade.

"You find them?" I asked , nodding to his open laptop.

"Yeah. Are you sure about this?" He looked worried, and if I was honest I was too. Blood was one thing, a whole dead person was something completely different.

"I need to see them." I said firmly, telling myself as much as Kade.

He hesitantly handed the laptop over and I gasped at the images before me. I don't know why, but I hadn't expected it to be a beautiful young woman laid, grey and lifeless on that bloody bed. She was so young and obviously very pretty. Her

face looked peaceful, like she was just sleeping, but the blood and carnage around her was in direct contrast.

Seeing that innocent girl and thinking of what an awful waste of a life it was that she had been killed for some sick monster's kicks, just spurred me on to stop him and not let this happen again.

I studied the body, laid out like she was in a coffin, with her hands posed one on the other, flat on top of her chest. Realising that had to be the centre, I took note of the distance from the top of the bed, to the hands, then handed Kade the laptop and got out of the car.

Kade followed me back into the room and I set right to work, trying not to see that poor lifeless girl laid on the bed as I moved around it.

I measured from the centre, where I calculated the girls hands to be, to the key point of each shape and noted the numbers down, then I set to work with the complicated equations, slotting in the new figures. It took some messing around, because I obviously didn't get the exact location of the centre point accurate, immediately, without the body there, but I got there in the end.

"Got it!" I declared as I snapped from the math headspace I had sunk into and came back up to reality. Kade was across the room, looking down at his cell, but his eyes shot up to meet mine when I spoke.

"Yeah?" He asked hopefully.

"I think so. I can't work them all out now. It will take time, but I have all of the numbers I need to do it, and most importantly I have the first two. We already knew it was tomorrow, but I have a time, GPS location and some other numbers, maybe to suggest the who?" I handed him the paper I had transferred what he needed to. He looked it over and smiled.

"You're a genius Livy. I can work with this." He hurried over to me and hugged me tight. "I'm going to get him this time, Love."

“I know you are.” I agreed as I looked up to him and felt the overwhelming need to kiss him. I reached up and put my hands on his wide shoulders. He felt it too, because his hands moved from my waist, to my butt and he lifted me clear off the ground, so I sat on his hands, my face now almost level with his. I didn’t hesitate knowing he wouldn’t initiate for fear of pushing me. My lips met his and we kissed for the first time. His lips pressed down against mine, firm and demanding. It sent tingles through my body and even though I had no clue what I was doing, I felt the need to open to him. As soon as my lips parted Kade’s tongue snaked in and attacked my mouth in a way I never expected, but thoroughly enjoyed. The butterflies in my stomach stirred into a whirlwind and I never wanted the moment to end as I ran my hands through his hair and gripped my legs around his waist.

Eventually Kade pulled away, both of us gasping for air. My lips were tingling and I felt like my body was buzzing. It had felt so amazing, like I was a part of him and I was surprised with how much more I wanted. I had been sure intimacy would never work for me, but that kiss, it had woken feelings in me I never felt before and I was sure if Kade had started touching me while his lips were locked on mine, I would have liked it. It gave me hope, and I’d take that for the time being at least.

“I liked that.” I admitted dreamily. I smiled up at him and knew I likely looked pretty loopy, but I didn’t care. I was happy.

“Me too Love. Me too.” He looked pretty loopy himself, a wide smile on his face.

“We can do that again, can’t we?” I asked hopefully.

“Damn right we can, and will,” He kissed my lips briefly, then lowered me back to the ground. “but right now I need to get you home to sleep, and I need to get to the office and set up for tomorrow, so we can arrest this fucker and get him off of the streets.”

“Ok.” I agreed and I took his hand eagerly.

“Jees, if I’d have known a kiss would make you so agreeable, I’d have taken action sooner.” He laughed and I hit out at him, then laughed too. I had just kissed him for the first time at a murder crime scene, and it had been amazing. I could hardly contain my excitement at the thought of how it would feel when it happened somewhere not drenched in death.

I was exhausted as Kade wrapped his huge hands around my waist and lifted me into his car. I hadn’t slept enough in the last forty eight hours and it was showing, my hands shaking and my voice croaking. My eyes were dry and scratchy too, from staring at the pages and walls for hours on end. I had been at the crime scene for almost seven hours, just lost in the math for most of that time.

I was excited to get home and take a long hot shower to wash away the smell of that room, then eat and sleep, all after I hugged each of my guys of course.

I laid my head back on the seat and closed my eyes as Kade started the car. It had been a long and crazy day, but it had ended wonderfully and I was blissfully happy, eager to try the kissing thing with each of my guys now.

“Make sure you eat when you get in, ok? You haven’t had anything since early this morning. I text Matt, so he should have something for you.” Kade said as he took my hand in his again. I loved the way they all touched me, holding my hands, or a hand on my back or shoulder, or arm. They knew me so well, knew I needed their contact to feel safe and grounded and they made sure I got it.

“I will. I’m pretty hungry.” I agreed as I opened my eyes and looked across to him with that stupid goofy smile still on my face.

“I love you Livy.” He said, surprising me, but in the best way.

“I love you too.” I whispered back. “You’ll be careful tomorrow, won’t you? I don’t know how I’d cope if I lost you.....lost any of you.” Just the thought of it stabbed through

my chest painfully. I needed them, all of them and I would never survive anything happening to them.

“You don’t need to worry, Love. I’m good at what I do and I don’t plan on going anywhere for a really fucking long time. You’re stuck with me.” He joked, but I hoped he meant it, because I was starting to realise these four guys were my future.

“Good.” I agreed as I squeezed his hand. He looked over at me briefly and I felt the love in the gentle smile he flashed me. I laid my head on his shoulder and sighed contentedly. I had no idea how I had been lucky enough to find these four perfect matches for my battered soul, but I had, and I was never letting them go.

“Kyle will likely be an ass when you get home.” Kade sighed, but I already knew.

“Because he’s been freaking out, worrying stupid all afternoon and evening?” I asked knowingly.

“Yeah,” Kade sounded so tired and I worried he was headed to work instead of to bed. “He’s just really protective, you know? I don’t want to tell his story, because it’s his to tell, but you should know, he lost someone when he was a kid, before we met, someone who meant a lot to him. He blamed himself for not stopping it, and in a way I think he still does.”

“That explains a lot.” I whispered. Kyle was crazy over protective with me and all of his family, and while it was incredibly comforting to know he looked out for me at all times, I worried about the way he constantly seemed to beat himself up if anything didn’t go the way he thought it should. He put too much pressure on himself.

“Yeah. He was doing better, getting a little more relaxed, then last year an IED took out his entire team on a mission and left him badly wounded. He of course blamed himself and we lost him for a while. You’re bringing him back, Love. Just try to be patient with him.”

“That’s awful Kade. His whole team?” I cried, tears filling my eyes for poor Kyle. How had he gotten through that? He was even stronger than I had realised.

“They were pretty tight, him and three other guys. I think for a long time he felt guilty that he survived.”

“But not anymore?” I asked hopefully. I just thanked God he had survived.

“No, not anymore. You make him want a future. I can see it in his eyes. I think having you makes him feel there was a reason he survived, for you, for us.”

“I get that. You guys make me want a future, too.” I admitted. “Kyle will be alright. We’ll all make sure of it.” I’d make damned sure of it.

“I know Love. I.....What the fuck?” The car, which was moving pretty fast down the quiet highway, lurched as Kade slammed the breaks on. We slowed, but didn’t stop in time.

“Kade?” I cried, terrified as I looked ahead to see what had panicked him, then I saw it as we careened over a strip laying across the road. It must have been something sharp because the tyres blew out loudly and the car started to skid across the slick surface. We had been going too fast and Kade was fighting to control the steering with the flat tyres and icy road.

“Fuck! Hold on!” He yelled. I braced my hands, one on the door and one on the seat beside me as we spun out of control. I just got one last look at Kade’s panicked face before the car smashed hard into something and the driver’s side, right behind Kade’s seat, bent into the car with a deafening crunch of metal. I lurched to the side, thrown by the force, smashing my head on the side window and everything went black.

My head was pounding so loud I couldn’t hear anything else when I opened my eyes. Warmth was running down the right side of my face and I knew it was blood. I fought to clear my foggy mind, trying to remember what the hell had happened and fighting to see through the blinding dizziness. Finally it

cleared a little and I saw the car windscreen before me, shattered. I moved my hand to feel the tiny pieces of glass in my lap.

I saw my bag strapped across my chest and it all came back to me, the message, the crime scene, the kiss and....

“KADE!” I yelled as I looked around for him. It hurt my head, but I pushed past it and found Kade slumped forward in his seat. His head was resting against the now flat airbag and he wasn't moving. Blood was pouring from somewhere on his head and the whole of his side of the car was mangled.

“Kade?” I cried as I started to struggle to get my seatbelt off. It was stuck at first and I literally had to rip it out of the holder to get free. My ankle screamed out in agony as I moved it, and when I looked down I realised it was likely broken from the impact of me pressing it against the front of the car to steady me as we hit. I tried to keep it as still as possible as I slid across the seat to get closer to Kade.

“Don't you dare do this to me again!” I growled at him as I tried to get down enough to see his face. He was pale and the blood was coming from his temple, on the left side. I shakily checked his neck for a pulse and let out a trapped sob when I found a steady one.

I sat panicking, trying to decide if I should try to sit him up, or if it was better not to move him. I was so scared I'd make things worse. Deciding to get help first I started patting my pockets, looking for my cell. It took me a few minutes for my addled brain to remember it was in the bag I still wore. I opened the front pocket and pulled it out. I sobbed again when I found we had service. At least that was something.

I dialled 911 and hurriedly told the dispatcher where we were on the highway and told her Kade was unconscious. She calmly told me not to move him and that help was coming. She asked me to stay on the line, but I hung up, needing to be with Kade. They were coming, it was all that mattered.

I had just gotten back to his side when he started to stir. He muttered a few times, and started to raise his head.

“Kade? Go easy. You have a head injury.” I cautioned as I put my hands on his shoulder and tried to gently help him ease up. He sat up straight and instantly held his head as he tried to look around. He turned to me with a groan and looked me over.

“Livy.....you’re bleeding?” He seemed confused and dazed.

“I’m ok. I called 911. Help is coming.”

“What happened?” He tried to wipe the blood from his face, but it just kept on flowing. I opened my bag and pulled out some kleenex. I handed him three and he pressed them to the wound.

“I don’t know. Th-there was something in the road. We ran over it and you l-ost control.” My voice was trembling and I could barely hear my own words over the thudding in my head.

“Fuck!” He cursed. He started fighting to move, but his legs seemed trapped in the mangled front end.

“Kade stop! What are you doing?”

“That was deliberate.....Someone set that strip across the road for us!” He was frantic, fighting to get free, but he was trapped and I was terrified he would hurt himself.

“What? Why would someone do that?” I asked.

“To get to us.....to get to you.” He looked around the car as a shiver ran down my back.

“Y.....You th-ink it’s *him*?” The words barely came out.

“I have to get out of here!” Kade yelled and he started pulling at the twisted car trapping him in place.

I looked around the car, but all I could see was pitch darkness. I saw headlights approaching a few feet above us where the road must be and I prayed it would be help, but deep down I

think I already knew. I felt a cold wash over me and I knew evil was approaching.

“Kade. I...I love you.” I whimpered. “T-Tell the guys I love th-them too, ok? And Keira, Evie and G-Grant.....and Xander.”

“Livy, you are not going anywhere!” Kade raged as he started violently trying to fight his way out.

“It’s too late.” I whimpered and then the car started to shake as someone fought to open my door from the outside.

“No! Fuck! Where the fuck is my gun?” He started looking around frantically like it should be on him, but I knew, since we came from home, he never put the holster he wore for work on. It was still locked away in the box in his trunk.

“It’s ok.” I tried to sound strong. “Help w-will come and get you out.”

“Livy, you do not give.....” He didn’t finish as my door was ripped open and a balaclava covered face looked in.

I screamed and wanted to scramble to Kade, but knew I needed to keep him out of it. He was trapped and vulnerable. I could deal with The Shadow taking me, but I could never handle knowing Kade was dead.

“Stay the fuck away from her!” Kade roared as he fought to get free so frantically I was sure he would rip a leg off if it was an option.

Hands grabbed my waist and started to lift me out. I glanced around to see the monster I knew so well, and then I realised.

Kade grabbed my hands as I flailed and he started to pull, trying to keep me with him.

“It’s not him!” I yelled to Kade, needing him to understand if there was any hope of them finding me again. “Kade.....it’s not The Shadow!” I got the words out just as the stranger ripped me from Kade’s grasp, and then ran with me in his arms. He was smaller than The Shadow, and much fitter. I fought, hitting and kicking out wherever I could as I screamed

for Kade, but it did no good. In a matter of seconds I was in the trunk of a car and it was speeding away.

I fought and screamed at first, kicking at the lid and sides of the trunk. Tears were streaming and I knew I was screwed. I didn't even know who had me, let alone where they were taking me. All I did know was that if I was going back to The Darkness again, I would not have the strength to survive it again.

COLE

Kyle had driven to the hospital like a man

possessed and neither Matt, nor I said a word, just as eager to get there as he was. Mom and Dad were on their way in too, Dad having received a phone call to say Kade had been rushed in from an RTA, unconscious, but stable. When he had asked about Livy they didn't have any information and we were all hoping like hell that was because she was sitting in a waiting room somewhere, shaken, but safe.

"Kade Maxwell?" Kyle barked when we reached the information desk at the ER.

"He was brought in from an RTA." I added, trying to sound a little less aggressive than my brother, having seen the alarm on the young girl's face when Kyle had spoken.

She started typing and studying the screen, then she looked up at us again.

"He's being assessed right now. If you take a seat someone will update you as soon as they can."

"Can you tell us anything? Has he regained consciousness yet?" Kyle demanded and I knew he was just scared. We had already been through this once with Kade in the last couple of

weeks. He was terrified we wouldn't get our brother back this time.

"I'm afraid I don't know. I can call through and let them know you're waiting though. They'll come out to speak with you as soon as possible."

"What about Oliva Byrd? She should have come in with him?" Matt asked and we all waited anxiously as she once again typed away on her keyboard.

"I don't have anyone by that name and the EMT report looks like there was only one person in the car at the time of recovery."

"She wasn't in the car." Matt sighed with relief.

"Then where the fuck is she? Kade wouldn't have just left her alone anywhere." I countered. It didn't make any sense.

"What if she got scared and ran from the car?" Matt asked, exactly what I was thinking.

"Fuck! She could still be out there, hurt and alone." Kyle growled.

"We need to speak to Kade, see if he remembers anything."

"We don't have time to wait for him to come round. If she's out there she could be seriously hurt, not to mention freezing to fucking death!" I hated to think of her out in the dark somewhere alone, hurt and shivering, as Kyle described.

"Let's go then. Matt stay and let us know when you get an update on Kade." I directed, knowing Kyle was struggling to keep his cool enough to be his usual bossy ass self.

Matt nodded, so Kyle and I set off running back to the car. Dad had told us where the car came off the road when he called us, so we had a good idea of where we were headed, and it wasn't far.

"I never should have let her go to that fucking crime scene!" Kyle raged from where he sat in the passenger seat. Him allowing me to drive was a sure sign of how badly he was

losing it. He never let anyone else drive, always needing to be the one in control.

“We all let her go, Kyle. This isn’t your fault. It’s not anyone’s fault. They had an accident, that’s all. We’ll find Livy and both she and Kade will be fine. Just breathe man.”

“I can’t lose anyone else Cole.....I just can’t.” He said quietly, a rare moment of weakness showing through his tough exterior, and it hurt to see my brother in so much pain. I hoped like fuck I was right and everyone was alright, for all our sakes.

“You’re not going to.” I replied confidently. “Now come on, pull it together. We need your army tracking mojo to find Livy. She’s gonna need you to be calm when we find her. She’ll be frightened enough.”

A few minutes later, with a much cooler Kyle, we pulled up to a mess of a scene, with two patrol cars, several unmarked vehicles and a ton of cops milling around.

“What the hell?” Kyle grumbled as I parked up at the back of the vehicles and we both jumped out.

“What’s going on?” I asked Kyle as we walked side by side to the guy we both recognised as Kade’s boss.

“I don’t know, but it can’t be good.” Kyle started running and I stayed in step with him. Two uniforms stepped forward to stop us as we approached the scene, but Kade’s boss recognised Kyle and approached.

“Kade’s brothers, right?” He asked.

“Yeah. I’m Kyle and this is Cole. What’s going on?”

“This was no accident. The first uniforms on scene found a spike strip across the road. It blew Maxwell’s tyres and the car spun out of control.”

Kyle and I looked at each other with the same deafening fear. I knew because I saw the panic I was feeling, reflected in his eyes.

“Do you have anything so far? Do you know who did this?” I asked as Kyle stood frozen, his chest heaving, I guessed part through panic and part through anger.

“I’m having all surrounding traffic footage pulled as we speak, and the immediate area around the crash is being combed for evidence.”

“I need to look around. Olivia, the kidnap victim. She was in the car with Kade. We thought she just got scared and ran away, but this sounds more like someone fucking took her!” Kyle was clearly fighting to stay level headed, but his anger and worry were coming through. I got it. I was ready to lose my shit too. If anyone had taken Livy, we knew who it would be and who knew if we would ever get her back from that? The fucker had held her for eight years last time!

“You think this was her captor?” Kade’s boss asked.

“It had to be. Can I take a look around or not?” Kyle growled.

“Yeah, ok. We’re done with the scene anyway for now.”

Kade’s boss relented and I had to run to keep up with Kyle as he hurried toward Kade’s completely wrecked car. It had hit a huge tree and seeing the state of the driver’s seat, I wondered how Kade had come out of it at all. My heart sank at the thought we could lose him too.

Kyle started wandering around the car, using the flashlight from his cell to study the ground closely. I had no idea what he was looking for, but I had every confidence he knew what he was doing. He was a very skilled, very dangerous guy. I just thanked fuck I was on his side.

“Hey, before I head out, do you recognise this?” Kade’s boss came up behind me and handed me an evidence bag. I looked down at Livy’s phone in the pink case I had ordered for her last week. It was decorated with candy, and had screamed Livy when I saw it.

“Yeah, it’s Olivia’s. Where’d you find it?”

“It was in the passenger seat footwell. It was used to dial 911 after the impact.”

“Have you listened to the call? She may have been on the line when she was taken!” I asked urgently.

“I’ve requested the transcripts, but it’s unlikely she was taken during the call. If that was the case, the dispatcher would have sent more cars to the scene in response.”

“Cole!” Kyle yelling across from the other side of the car pulled my attention and I hurried over with Kade’s boss following.

“Someone took her.” Kyle whispered as I crouched down beside him.

“How do you know?” I wouldn’t believe it, I couldn’t. The thought of never seeing my beautiful Olivia again was more pain than I could bear.

“Footprints. The EMT’s came down the banking over there, and approached around the front of the car. These footprints come from back there.” Kyle pointed behind him. In the opposite direction of the EMT route he had pointed out. “They come down to the passenger side, then going back they’re deeper.”

“Because he was carrying extra weight on the way back up?” Kade’s boss asked.

“He was carrying Livy.” Kyle agreed and I had to stand up as I fought to breathe through my panic. That monster had our Livy again and who knew what he would do to her this time. Would we ever see her smiling face again? I had a sinking feeling we lost her for good this time and the pain it caused was crippling.

CHAPTER 16

OLIVIA

I had passed out at some point, exhausted from the very long day and from fighting for my damned life to get out of that trunk. I had beaten the top and sides of it until my hands throbbed in agony. When that hadn't worked I had screamed repeatedly for as long and as loud as I could. Still we just continued to drive and eventually exhaustion and my battered head gave in, and darkness overcame me.

Now I was awake again and found myself no longer in the freezing cold trunk. I had been moved, without me waking, and I now found myself tied at my wrists and ankles to a wooden chair, in a bright, but starkly empty room. The walls were decorated in a cheerly yellow colour, almost mocking my misery as I struggled, hopelessly, to get free.

I could see out of the window opposite me, into wide open fields. The sun was out, telling me I must have passed out for some time, since day had come around once again.

I hoped like hell, the emergency services found Kade in time. He had been bleeding so much and he did not look good when I was torn away from him.

I tried to maneuver my hands from the ropes again, but it was hopeless, they were too tight. I looked out of the window again. I was on the second floor, but I was pretty sure if I could just get free, I could get to the ground and flee. I'd do whatever it took to get away. No way I was going to just rollover and take what I had to this time. I'd die fighting to keep unwanted hands from me if I had to this time. Death would be a better option over what I had suffered for far too long before. At least this time I had fresh beautiful memories of my guys to think of as I slipped away. My time with them had been short, but it had been beautiful.

Fast approaching heavy footsteps had flashbacks of The Shadow coming down the steps to me in The Darkness, flashing through my mind. I took deep breaths and fought them away, knowing I needed to keep my wits about me if there was to be any hope of ever getting home to the guys ever again.

The door to the room opened behind me and I held my breath waiting to see if The Shadow would appear before me, maybe having had someone else grab me for him. My entire body was shaking with fear, adrenaline, and pain in my head. I could barely catch my erratic breaths as my chest began to heave violently.

"You're scared little mouse?" A voice asked. Words! Words were good. The Shadow never used words! I thought about the voice, trying to work out if it was familiar, but I knew I had never heard that nasally tone before.

I tried hard to channel Kyle as I strengthened my body, sat up straight and replied sharply, with a strength I did not feel.

"No I'm not scared! You better let me the fuck out of here now!"

"I can't do that *Livy*." He appeared before me as he spat my name like it was poisoned. I wondered how he knew who I was, but then realised Kade had been yelling my name the whole time this maniac carried me away.

The balaclava was gone now, and beady little pale blue eyes locked down on me. His face was thin and pinched, with a pointed nose and a mouth too small for his long angular face. His hair was pale too, almost white blonde and hung way too long down both sides of his face. It was ironic he had called me mouse, when he very much resembled a rat.

He looked young, maybe mid twenties, and his body was lean and long. He was tall, at

maybe six feet, with long gangly legs and arms, and dressed in the all black outfit of slacks and a button down, he looked intimidating. especially to someone as tiny as me.

“You have to stay with me now, until it’s time anyway.” I did not like the sound of that last part.

“Time for what?” I demanded.

“For me to go back. I worked it out. I can go back and I can save them.” He whispered, like it was a huge secret.

“Go back where?” I asked.

“Back, to the past, to save my family. I’ve been working for years and finally I found it, the way back!”

“You’re talking about time travel?” I asked, shocked.

“Yes. It wasn’t easy, but I worked out the component I was missing, blood. There has to be an exchange, something to gift to the universe for my ability to go back. It couldn’t just be any blood either, it had to be equal to me. It has to be a fair exchange. That’s why I set the puzzles and you, you came just like a little mouse, nibbling the cheese and scampering right into my trap.”

“What are you talking about? There’s no such thing as time travel!” I cried, scared now. This guy clearly wasn’t playing with a full deck, “You can’t go back, you freak!”

I wasn’t expecting the hard back hand I received in response to my comment. It hit me so hard across my right cheek I saw stars, then I cried out in agony as the chair tipped and landed hard on my badly broken ankle. The pain was unbearable as I

lay tied to the chair, on my side, all of weight rested on that messed up ankle.

“Do not talk to me like that!” The Froot Loop yelled angrily and I knew I had set him off. *Great work Livy!*

“O.....Ok.” I gasped through the red hot agony. “I w-won’t. Just please.....please sit m-me back up.”

He grabbed the top of the chair and roughly shoved it back up. I screamed as my ankle took the weight of the whole thing for a moment, then I was back upright and the agony was throbbing still, but less.

“If you won’t help me go back, then you’re no good to me.” He said, sounding a lot like a sulking child. I couldn’t believe this guy was the one who had murdered three people, evaded the police and left those crazy complicated math puzzles. He didn’t seem capable of any of it.

“Of course I’ll help you!” I hurried to assure him. I needed to bide my time. Kade and his team were looking for this guy. There was hope they would find me before this crazy drained me of my blood completely, which I had assumed was his plan when he said he needed my blood. I just hoped Kade realised this was the killer and didn’t waste time looking for The Shadow.

“Good.” He said with a creepy, way too toothy smile. “I knew you’d be the one. We need to prepare. We don’t have long. I need to go back tomorrow, at noon.”

I swallowed down the huge lump in my throat and fought to breathe. I had until tomorrow at noon before this crazy guy killed me.

Please guys, please find me and come for me.

MATT

It was almost twenty four hours since Olivia had been taken and we were all losing our fucking minds including my Mom and Dad who had spent all day doing all they could to get information from anyone and everyone who could know anything at all about Olivia's original kidnapping.

We weren't sure if that was who had taken her, especially since Kade said her last words were that it wasn't 'The Shadow', as she called her kidnapper, who grabbed her, but it was our best and only theory. Kade reasoned she could have been so scared she got confused, or her kidnapper could have an accomplice Livy never saw.

Kade was at the office, working every lead he could from the old kidnapping, and from the traffic cam footage they had from about a mile up the highway from where Olivia was taken. His whole team was working on helping him find Olivia and he hadn't stopped since he was released from the hospital with a mild concussion about twelve hours before.

He had been distraught when he woke up, furious with himself that he had just sat and let her be taken, but that wasn't the case. He had been pinned in the car and had needed to be cut free from it. There was nothing he could have done, not that he believed us when we told him that.

Cole was holed up in the office, working crazily on the math Olivia had begun to solve. He had the final numbers she had sent to Kade's techs from the motel, and he was determined to work out the equations for Livy, because she had been so desperate to catch the killer before he hurt anyone else. Cole wanted the whole thing settled for her, when we found her, which he was determined we would. I wanted to believe we would too, but if the same kidnapper had taken her, he had successfully held her for eight years last time. I was secretly worried we would never get her back. Surely he would be more careful this time, and keep her from getting away again? If he took her to the same place, then maybe Kyle would find her, since he had headed out there with his boss and a team to search the area for the cabin, but if the kidnapper had taken her

somewhere new, somewhere equally as remote and off grid, what hope did we have?

“Matt? Has there been any updates?” Xander asked as he hurried in. He had been working all day and had just gotten off shift. Simon followed him in and they both looked worried.

“No, not really.” I sighed. “Kyle’s out near Shawnee with a team. I’m just hoping he finds this cabin, and that that’s where she is.”

“Mom and Dad?”

“In the kitchen. They have the old case file from when Olivia was first taken and they’re calling anyone mentioned for new leads. Mom’s bad, she can’t stop crying.”

“I know how she fucking feels! I saw first hand what that monster did to Livy. The thought that he has her back.....I can’t....” He was raging, his face red with rage and his chest lurching with his heaving gasps for breath. Simon held him in an attempt to quell his rage.

“Don’t Xand. I can’t....I just need her back, we all do.” I fought hard to push back the tears, but it was impossible. Olivia Byrd had been in our lives just over three weeks and in that time she became such a huge part of all of us. I didn’t know how any of us could ever be the same without her, and worse yet, if we had to go on without finding her, knowing how she may be suffering at the hands of that monster and being powerless to do anything to help her.

“We will find her Matt. Not one of us is going to give up until she’s back safe where she belongs.” Xander said firmly, giving me the kick I needed to do something.

“You’re right.” I said as I stood and took a deep breath to get it together.

“Where are you going?” Xand asked when I pulled out my keys and headed out.

“I need to do something. I’m going back to that motel where the crime scene was, see if anyone noticed any cars loitering

or anything. If he knew where to get Kade's car, he must have known where they were." I reasoned.

"We're coming with you. That's a good plan." Simon agreed and we all headed out. Xander was right, we would never give up looking for our Livy, even if it took the rest of our lives, we would find her, we had to.

I sighed as the three of us knocked on about the twentieth door. It was late, so most people wouldn't answer, and those who did weren't interested in helping. We had been to all of the motel rooms, and to the two apartment blocks opposite. Now we were trying a row of condos just to the right of the shithole place.

I was losing hope that this was a worthwhile use of time, but since no one else had anything to go on, I refused to give up until I tried every door.

The door opened about an inch against a chain and an elderly lady looked out at us cautiously.

"Hello Ma'am." I greeted, trying to seem as non threatening as possible. "I'm so sorry to bother you when it's so late, but we need your help if possible."

"You police?" She asked, her voice rough, like she smoked a pack a day.

"No, but we are looking for information. My girlfriend was abducted late last night, and before she was taken, she was at the motel across there, working with the police."

"That motel is nothing but trouble. There was a murder there this week, you know? Damn rot on this neighbourhood, filled with hookers and drugged out criminals. It needs tearing down, the whole damn place!" She ranted and I had to agree. The place was a crap hole.

"Yeah, my girlfriend was helping the police with that murder, and shortly after she was taken. I was wondering if you

noticed anyone suspicious hanging out in the area yesterday at any time in the afternoon or evening?”

“Ha! When ain’t there suspicious types around that place, kid?” She laughed.

“This would have likely been a middle aged man, likely sitting in his car or van, watching the motel.” Xander cut in.

“There was a guy in a big beige car. I didn’t like the way he was watching the neighbourhood. I thought he was casing the homes. That was around eight last night. He sat there for a good hour before he finally moved on.”

“Do you know any more details about the car?” I asked urgently. “Make? Model? Did you get a good look at the guy?”

“I aint no good with cars son, but I saw the guy. He was thin with longish blonde hair and a real rodent looking face. He set my alarm bells off, that’s for sure.” She shuddered as she spoke.

“But you’re sure the car was beige?” Xander asked and she nodded vehemently. “And you said it was big? Like an estate model, or more like a van or something much bigger?”

“Oh I don’t know. I didn’t look that hard at the damned car. I just saw he was hanging around, so I took down his licence plate, just in case, ya know?”

“You have the licence plate?” I asked eagerly.

“Of course. I don’t just see some creep in my neighbourhood and turn a blind eye. I do my duty and note the details, in case the police come knocking.” She wandered off and then came back unchaining the door and opening it fully. She had a floral notepad in her hand and she opened it to a page which held yesterday’s date and the words ‘Beige car creeper’ followed by a licence plate.

“Thank you Ma’am.” I smiled as I took the book and photographed the page with my cell.

“You think this creeper took your girl? He looked the sort.” She asked.

“I don’t know, but thank you for your help. You’ve been really helpful.” I smiled at her once more then hurried away from the house and dialled Kade.

He answered right away, likely stood with his cell in his hand waiting for news like we all were.

“Matt? Please give me something.” He answered and he sounded more exhausted and beaten than I had ever heard him.

“I might be able to actually. Me, Xand and Simon are at the motel you were at yesterday. We’ve been questioning the neighbours, thinking maybe this guy was watching you and Livy when you were here.”

“Smart. You got something?”

“Yeah, an elderly neighbour saw a beige car loitering, the guy just watching around him. She said he was thin, like you described.”

“She got details on the car?” Kade asked with some hope.

“Better. She noted down the plate. I have it.”

“Fuck! This is good Matt. text me the plate and I’ll run it. This could be the break we need.”

“I hope so. I’ll send it now.”

Please let this be a break, I thought. We had to get her back, before that fucker did something to our girl we couldn’t fix.

OLIVIA

The sun was beginning to rise again, outside the window I still faced, tied to the same damn chair. It had been a long night for me, unable to sleep, my head and ankle throbbing in agony as I sat contemplating my slow impending death.

How the hell did this shit happen to me? I was the victim of a horror filled, eight year long kidnapping. How could I escape

that, only to end up being taken by a murdering crazy man just weeks later? I started to think there really was something wrong with me, something that drew in the evil bastards of the world.

Footsteps from somewhere in the house I was in, had me freezing and holding my breath so I could hear if he was approaching again. He had left me alone the day before, once he spilled his crazy plan and I had worked my way through several long anxiety attacks as memories of everything The Shadow did to me, hit as soon as darkness and silence descended on the room. It took me hours to find a way to keep it together, and that way was my guys. I closed my eyes and remembered all of the times I had spent with them, remembered the night we all laid in my bed together and they all held me. It pulled me through the long dark night and eventually the sun came up again. It was a comfort to see light, but also a startling reminder that I was running out of time. The crazy guy was going to drain my blood in about six hours and there was nothing I could do to stop it. I had tried for hours to slip the ropes holding me to the chair, but they were too tight and too strong. All I did was wear the skin from my wrists and further hurt my already hugely swollen ankle.

The footsteps in the house became louder and I knew he was coming back. I sat up straight, determined not to let him see how very terrified I really was. I wanted to be strong like I knew my guys would be if they had been taken like this. They would never give up.

The door to the room flew open and I hoped like hell he had water, and food, but water was priority. I had been taken, I guessed, around thirty six hours ago, and I hadn't been given anything in that time. Before that I'd been in my Math trance, and barely eaten or drank anything either, so I knew I was not in a great place. Certainly the fact I hadn't needed to pee the whole time I'd been tied up, was not a good sign.

He walked in with nothing in his hands and looked at me appraisingly. He still wore his all black ensemble, but he looked even wilder than he had the day before.

“It’s time to prepare.” He declared.

“What? No! It’s too early! You said Noon?”

“We will complete the exchange at noon, and I will go back, but letting all of your blood will take time. I need to begin now. I will drain as much as I can while keeping you alive, then we will complete at noon.” He explained, so matter of factly like he was discussing plans for something mundane, not my murder!

“You can’t do this!” I cried. “Listen to me...II think you’re sick, but you can get help. I could help you. We could find a doctor who could help you.” I stuttered as he started to untie my feet. He paused what he was doing as I went on, and when he stood over me menacingly, I saw the evil in those icy eyes.

“I told you not to talk like that!” He hissed, then he hit me again, on the same cheek as the night before, but this time it was a fist and when I went down, I blacked out for a few minutes.

When I came around I felt a sharp pain in my arm and when I looked I found him leaning over me, injecting something into my arm.

“It’s too late for me to find another now. I’ll have to use your blood. You’re a troublemaker but this will make you behave.” He explained as he shot who knew what into me. I tried to fight him, but my arms were still tied to the chair tight, and I was laid on one of them as the chair had again tipped over.

By the time he stood, whatever he had given me was rushing through my system. I could feel the heat of it as it spread through me and then everything went fuzzy and I felt like my mind wasn’t connected to any of my body anymore. I tried to maintain focus, but there was no way I could. Whatever he had given me, carried me far far away. I tried hard to cling to the image of my four guys, but eventually the fuzziness pulled that from me too and I was gone.

KADE

I'd raced home after Matt called me, needing to get to Kyle before he did anything stupid. He had been sent home by his boss, after he near killed a shop manager who wouldn't help them with their questions out near Shawnee. Kyle had needed to be pulled off of the unsuspecting civilian by three of his team, and then sent home to cool off. The team would remain and continue the search, but Kyle couldn't be there.

Matt had called me frantic when Kyle got home early that morning and started smashing up his bedroom. Matt and Cole had been unable to stop him and instead had shut him in his room and called me. I knew why Kyle was losing his shit. She had been gone thirty six hours and we were all losing our damned minds imagining what that fucker was putting her through with every minute that passed, but this, Kyle letting his anger out, it wouldn't find her.

"Kade! Thank fuck!" Matt gasped when I ran up the stairs to the first floor. He and Cole were standing outside Kyle's bedroom door looking so worried and lost as the sounds of Kyle raging and smashing up probably everything he owned came from inside.

"Where are Mom and Evie?" I asked, not wanting either coming in and getting caught in the crosshairs.

"Mom went to drop Evie at Gran's for a few days. She didn't want her seeing how upset we all are." I already knew my Dad had a meeting with the Police Superintendent to make sure every step was being taken to find Livy.

"Ok. Clear out guys. I got this." They both watched nervously as I shrugged off my jacket and dumped it over the handrail at the top of the stairs.

"Kade..." Cole began, but I stopped him. I knew he was worried, but I could handle Kyle, even as amped up as he was.

“Go, keep working on whatever leads you have. Finding Livy is all that matters right now.”

I knew Matt had a list of Olivia’s old classmates he was calling to check if they had seen anything the morning she was taken, and Cole was still trying to work the math of the killer I was chasing. That had been put on hold by me, since again, the fucker never turned up to the location he had put in the puzzle, but Cole was determined to figure out the math for Livy.

We did have the licence plate lead, and my team were working it, but the car had been stolen from Washington Park two weeks before, so there was no instant name to work with. We were chasing the lead though, checking all surveillance footage where the car was stolen and surrounding areas.

As soon as Cole and Matt reluctantly headed down stairs, I opened Kyle’s bedroom door and strode in, closing it behind me.

The place was carnage, all of the furniture up-ended and every picture smashed to pieces on the floor. Kyle stood in the corner shaking with rage and searching for the next thing to destroy.

“Spring cleaning Bro?” I asked to get his attention. He looked up to me, his chest heaving with the huge breaths he was taking. I braced myself, realising I had never seen him this bad before.

“FUCK OFF KADE!” He roared.

“Can’t do that Ky and you know it.” I sighed.

“I did this! I do this to every one I ever fucking care about!”

“Not this bullshit again Ky!” I laughed. He took too much on himself, always thinking it was his job to protect the whole fucking world. “This wasn’t your fault. Were you sitting in the car beside her as some fucker tore her away, listening to her scream her heart out for you? No! You weren’t. I fucking was!”

“I shouldn’t have let her go! I knew it was a bad idea! I should have gone with my gut and stopped her, just like I should have stopped Reece, and just like I should have trusted my gut about that fucking last mission!” He picked up the nightstand he stood beside and smashed it down violently between us.

“ENOUGH KYLE!” I raged, needing to stop his downward spiral. “This, blaming yourself, or anyone, it’s not helping you, us or Livy. What happened, happened. All we can do now is make sure we get her back as fast as possible.”

“How? We have zilch to go on!” He snapped.

“I have the licence plate lead, and we have several cars on traffic cams headed out of the city on that highway, one of which matches the plates Matt got. It might not be much, but it’s something. I need to work on it, but I can’t if I have to be here stopping you from fucking up the house and yourself!”

He took a deep breath and deflated as he sank down the wall to the floor. He hunched into himself and I knew it was safe to approach. I sat beside him and took a deep breath.

“I can’t lose her Kade. I’ve lost too much. If....If I lose her too, I don’t know how I go on.” He whispered emotionally.

“I know man. We all feel the same. She’s our light in a very long darkness, and if she’s gone, all we have ahead is more darkness. I feel it Kyle, but we can’t lose it. She needs us. She’ll hold on for us, I know she will, and we are not letting her down.”

“I just need her back.”

“Then let’s go and get her. Save this rage for when we find the fucker who has her.” I said firmly. As a CPD detective I couldn’t let him kill the sonofabitch, but I would damn well let Kyle beat the shit out of him before I slapped on the cuffs. Hell, I’d fucking help if one hair on Livy’s head was hurt.

Kyle nodded and I knew I had gotten through. Now I just needed to find Livy, because without her I knew my whole damn world was going to come falling down around my ears.

CHAPTER 17

OLIVIA

I'm pretty sure I never fully blacked out because I felt myself moving and heard sounds around me, but for a long time I was pretty, let's say, spaced. Then things started to slowly come back to me.

First it was sounds, of footsteps walking on what I guessed was a hard floor around me, then my wildly fuzzy vision slowly cleared and I saw the figure of a man walking around me, busily doing something. I tried to move my head to follow his path, but my body still seemed not to be cooperating. Scared and confused, I closed my eyes and tried to centre myself. Instantly an image of the guys came to me and I clung to it tight. I stayed that way for as long as I could, but as time passed the footsteps around me got louder and more hurried and I started to feel parts of my body once again, my back pressed against a hard floor, my hands tied together in front of me, resting on my stomach, the desperate pain in my throbbing head, and mangled ankle.

The memory of the crazy guy laying out his plan was what made me snap my eyes open in a panic though. I looked around, my vision now much clearer. For a few moments I was dizzy and nauseous, but as I breathed slower, it passed.

I looked around and couldn't believe my eyes at what I was seeing. All along the wall to my right was some kind of machine. It filled the entire wall, floor to ceiling and was likely about three metres square. I could tell this man had built it himself, because it was a rag tag heap of random electricals

all wired together. I saw a microwave and several tower's from PC's, all mixed in with components from who knew what else. It had a huge metal closet looking box at it's centre and there were several screens all lit up with rows of data. As I studied I realised two things. One, this was his time machine, and two, he was bat shit crazy if he thought that thing was taking him anywhere. It looked like an out of control school science fair project.

“Good. You're awake. We only have a couple of hours to prepare now. I have around half of your blood.” He held up a huge clear bag filled with my blood. It was darker than it should be and I knew it would be clotting now it was out of my body. I suddenly realised why I had felt dizzy, I was missing a hell of a lot of blood!

“The rest won't take long. I'll start draining it half an hour before the exchange to be sure I have time. Don't worry. Your loss will be worth it when I save my family.” He said, like that would make all of my fears and concerns so much better.

“You're fucking crazy!” I spat out scared and angry. My words were slurred and so hard to get out, but I was mad and needed to vent. This was not how I wanted to die! I fought to survive for years, so that one day I could actually live. I did that. I got out and I found a life amongst all of the loss and darkness. I found my guys, friends and family. I found some level of peace and happiness, and now just weeks after fleeing hell, I was going to die at the hands of some other depraved monster. He got angry, and I was sure he'd hit me again, but instead he just smiled, which was terrifying.

“You're scared, I know you are. Let me help you relax.” He said, then he pulled another syringe out and no matter how hard I tried to make my arms move to stop him, they didn't, He injected me and I floated off to La La Land once again, wondering if I would ever wake up again before he ended me.

KYLE

Kade had been right to make me pull myself together. I had lost it earlier and it had only slowed down the search for Liv. As soon as Kade headed out on a call from the office I had taken a shower to calm myself down, then dressed, ready to do whatever it took to get Liv back from the clutches of that motherfucker.

I had been an idiot, out near the national park, losing it on some asshole who was seriously a huge douche, but not bad enough for me to tear apart as I wanted to.

Lucky for me Rob had stepped in quickly and smoothed the situation over, then he'd shoved my ass in my car and told me to get home and stay there. He was right, but it didn't make it any easier to not be out there searching for Liv when I knew damn well she needed me.

Now it was after eleven and Liv had been gone for way too many hours. It tore me apart to think what could have happened to her in that amount of time. All I could think about were the scars she had shown us, and the fact that fucker was likely causing her more, fucking torturing her!

"Kyle, eat! You haven't had a thing in days have you?" Matt asked as he placed a huge sub down in front of me. I tried to pick at it, knowing I would need some energy to find Liv, but I felt guilty eating when I knew she was likely laid in the dark somewhere, starving and scared.

"Anything?" Cole asked as he appeared from the office and sat in the seat at the island beside me.

"Not yet, but Kade's on the phone and has been for almost an hour. You?" Matt handed Cole a sandwich too as he spoke. Cole too just looked at it with disgust.

"Either I've fucked up the math, or that message is really weird. I've found a chunk that relates to time travel theory?"

“Why the fuck would that be in a message related to murders?” Matt asked.

“The guy’s a fucking wacko. Who knows what rationale he’s using for these murders?” I cut in, and they both nodded.

“Whatever he’s doing, it’s weird. Did he take blood from the victims?”

“I don’t think so, why?” He had me interested now and since there were no leads on Livy, we might as well do what she was determined to do, save another innocent life.

“The words between the numbers, blood keeps on coming up and there’s a ton of focus on equality and purity. It made me think of cults and rituals and shit.” Cole explained with a shrug.

“Pass it all on to Kade. You could be onto something.” I suggested.

“Yeah, time travel and blood rituals. I bet that will narrow it down.” Cole snorted.

Kade came running into the kitchen before anyone else spoke and we all jumped up, terrified for the worst news.

“We have to move. We have a lead on the location of that car.” That was all he said before he ran out and we all followed. We piled into Cole’s truck, since it was the biggest, now Kade’s SUV was totaled. Kade, who was driving, set off like a racecar driver.

“So you think that was the guy, the one lurking in the beige estate?” Matt asked.

“Traffic cam footage picked the car up on the same highway at the right time. That was suspicious enough, but then one of the techs working this case and the murders, recognized the damn car from traffic cams near the murder last week. We checked and the same car was right outside the motel where the third body was found.” He explained hurriedly, never taking his eyes from the road.

“So you think the fucking murderer has her?” Cole yelled.

“I think the math at the last murder scene was some kind of trap. He wanted to see who could figure it out, so he wrote a puzzle you had to see, to solve, and he waited to see who came. He wanted her for something because she understood his math.”

“Like what?” I asked, confused. If a murderer took our girl, we could be too late and that realisation near stopped my heart. “Please tell me we’re not headed to a motel?”

“Oh Fuck! Are we, Kade? Is she dead?” Matt asked frantically.

“It’s not a motel. It’s a house in the middle of nowhere. Highway patrol spotted the car on their route because I put a BOLO out for it. She’s not fucking dead, she can’t be,” Kade growled as he gripped the steering wheel so hard his knuckles turned white.

“This is what he wanted.” Cole, who had been quiet for a few minutes said. I turned from the front passenger seat to look at him and he was pale.

“What is it?” I asked.

“The message!” He cried. “That’s what it was about, all the equality shit. Whatever he’s doing, something to do with time travel I’m sure, he thinks he needs the blood of his equal. That’s why he set up those murders and the messages, to find his equal, the person who was smart enough to solve his puzzles.”

“So he could take her blood?” Matt asked with dread and I felt it too.

“Fuck! Kade drive fucking faster. Can’t those patrol uniforms go in?” I asked, just needing her to be safe.

“Back up is ten minutes out and they can’t go in without it.”

“Fuck that! She could be dying in there!” Cole yelled, taking the words from my mouth. “How far out are we?”

“About the same.”

I wanted to scream and shout for Kade to drive faster, but I knew that wasn't going to happen. He already had his foot down, as desperate to get to Livy as we all were.

"Just hold on for us, Princess. We're coming." I whispered.

OLIVIA

I came around to a sharp stab in my arm. My eyes snapped open in panic and I found my captor looming over me, pushing what looked like an IV in my left arm, except it wasn't like the modern clear plastic tubes and a delicate little needle I had seen in the hospital. This thing looked like an antique, the tube thick brown rubber and the needle huge and thick.

"Get away from me!" I yelled as I tried to struggle free of the needle which likely held millions of bacteria and who knew what else? But I couldn't struggle, couldn't move at all. I was tied to what looked like a heavy wood dining table. My wrists were bound with rope and tied together under the table and my ankles were tied to the bottom table legs. There was also a ton of rope around my torso, bound round and round me from just beneath my breasts, right to the bottom of my stomach, binding me solidly to the table. There was no way I was getting loose.

"Don't try to fight now. It's time for me to go back." He said as he stepped away from me with the other end of the long rubber tube in his hand. "You're making history here, Livy."

"Yeah, serial killer victims history." I retorted. This was it. I was going to die. I'd already lost too much blood and I knew as soon as he started taking more, I'd just drift away. Time was up and I had no way to escape. I could try talking him down, but I knew it was useless. He believed this was going to happen, that he would travel back in time in his magic closet.

I watched as he attached the end of the tube to what looked like an IV bag which was integrated into the bottom of his pile of crappy electricals, time machine. Beside it sat the first bag of my blood he took, now almost turned black. The sight of it turned my stomach and I felt nauseous and dizzy all at once. My entire body was trembling once again and my fight or flight instincts were screaming at me to do something!

Instead I closed my eyes and tried to picture my guys, my fiercely protective Kyle, and the way his entire face lit up when he smiled and laughed, the dangerous looking edge to him when he was mad. When he held me, I just knew he would push the whole world away for me if I needed him to. My beautiful gentle giant Cole, laid beside me in bed, telling me stupid stories until I hurt from laughing, and the way I felt so small and protected wrapped in his huge body. My sensitive and understanding Matt, who always knew what I needed, sometimes before I did, I heard him speaking to me in spanish as we snuggled together, the way he looked at me with that lazy half smile. And my thoughtful and caring Kade, who I could always turn to when I needed to feel some solidity and calm. He always knew just what to say to calm me and when he surrounded me with his huge, built body I just knew nothing could ever hurt me.

I wished I could just have a few minutes with them all again, to tell them how special they had made the brief few weeks we got together, to tell them how much I loved them all.

“It’s time!” He shouted excitedly, pulling me from my thoughts. I looked up just as he climbed into his metal box and slammed the doors closed.

I almost laughed at the ridiculousness of the situation. That crazy freak had just climbed into a closet, and now sat in there waiting for this heap of junk he had built to carry him away in time. What the fuck? As Kyle would say.

How could someone intelligent enough to generate the maths I had worked on, be this crazy? It really would have been funny if it weren’t costing me everything.

I looked down to my blood flowing down from my arm, down to the bag in the machine and it made me feel even more nauseous.

Knowing there was nothing to be done I closed my eyes, laid my head back and allowed the darkness to seep in. My last thought was that maybe I had always been destined to spend my life in the darkness.

KADE

When we pulled up at a rundown old farmhouse, just outside the city several other patrol cars, and three members of my team, including the chief, were just arriving too.

I swerved Cole's truck into a space beside the beige estate, parked a short distance from the front of the house and we all jumped out.

Anticipating Kyle would charge off, I hurried around and grabbed his arm.

"We need vests. We know this guy has a gun. He shot one of his victims." I said calmly.

"Screw that! We have to get in there!"

"Maxwell! Any chance I can convince you to hold back on this one?" My Chief asked as he approached.

"Not gonna happen. Kyle and I are going in." I said, and Cole and Matt both stepped to me menacingly.

"No way guys. You need to wait out here," Kyle agreed with me before I said a word.

"She needs us!" Matt growled, looking more pissed than I had ever seen him.

"We're going to get her out of there," I said confidently. "You two be ready to go to the hospital with her,"

My chief handed Kyle and I vests, and we both checked our guns were fully loaded and ready to go. No one was stopping us from getting our girl out of there.

The uniforms went in first lead by the chief, ten officers I knew well from my precinct. Kyle and I followed behind as the rooms in the farmhouse were cleared one by one. The place was a crumbling shithole in need of demolition. It was clear it hadn't been lived in for many years.

Kyle motioned me to the stairs and nodded to footprints through the inch thick layer of dust everything was covered in. I signalled the uniforms around me to follow and we started up the stairs, guns at the ready. The first room Kyle went into had been recently decorated, painted bright yellow and in the centre sat a single chair with ropes on the floor, like someone, likely Livy, had been tied up there. I tried not to panic at the thought she wasn't there anymore. There were multiple reasons he would have moved her. I told myself over and over, it didn't mean we were too late.

I indicated next door and Kyle followed close behind. I tried the handle while Kyle watched my back, but this one was locked. I stepped back and nodded once to my brother, that the only signal he needed to know what I was going to do.

I lifted my foot and kicked up, smashing the handle clear from the door as it flew open. Kyle moved in, gun raised and I was right behind him.

Livy was bound to a table in the centre of the room, not moving, her eyes closed and she looked deathly pale. My heart stopped as I realised she looked very much like we were too fucking late. She had some archaic looking IV in her arm, leading down to way too much of her blood in bags, attached to some kind of crazy looking monster of a machine.

I stood frozen for a moment, losing my shit because I was sure she was gone, but Kyle kept it together. He tapped my shoulder and directed me to what looked like a huge metal closet in the centre of the pile of machinery. When I looked over at it, I heard a voice from within it, and realised Kyle was

telling me someone was in there. I could barely focus though, in my panic for Livy.

Pulling myself together I nodded and pointed to Livy, telling him to help her while I took care of the motherfucker who took her, now hiding in the fucking closet.

Two uniforms walked in behind us and I beckoned them to follow me. They spread out before the closet, guns at the ready. Sure they had me covered, I released one hand from the butt of my gun and ripped open the closet doors.

“You can’t stop me!” The fucker yelled as he raised a gun. Before I pulled the trigger on my raised weapon, shots rang out and he crumpled to the bottom of the closet, two shots clear to see in his chest, both uniforms having fired first.

I stepped forward and kicked his gun clear away from him, but I knew he wasn’t ever getting back up.

“We got him from here, detective.” One of the uniforms behind me said as they both stepped forward.

“Kade! She’s barely alive! Her pulse is weak as fuck! Get EMT’S in here!” Kyle yelled, as I hurriedly across the room to him. I unclipped the radio from my belt to report the house clear, and request EMTs, then I fell to my knees and started trying to help Kyle free her from the yards of rope she was bound with.

“How bad?” I asked Kyle as we worked. He wasn’t a medic, but he knew a lot from the time he served, so I knew he would be able to tell me.

“Bad. She’s lost almost her entire blood volume.” Kyle didn’t stop cutting the ropes with his penknife as he spoke. “She needs fluids and we have to get her to the hospital fast.”

We got her free of the ropes just as two EMTs came into the room and set to work. Kyle and I stood back and let them work, but I had never felt as scared in my life as I did in those few moments. She was too still and too pale. I was sure we had already lost her and it tore me in fucking two.

“LIVY!” I looked up to the door as Cole and Matt came running in. I had known the uniforms wouldn’t be able to keep them outside for long.

“She’s still alive, but it’s not good guys.” Kyle explained as he stopped them from getting the way of the EMT’s. “She’s holding on, but she’s lost way too much blood.” Kyle’s voice breaking as he spoke and I knew he was having to fight to keep a rein on his emotions.

“But she’ll be ok, right?” Cole asked. “We got here in time? They can save her?”

“I really fucking hope so.” Kyle whispered.

Livy was loaded onto a gurney and EMTs sped away with her, the four of us following.

“Just one with us!” The male EMT called as they loaded her into the rig.

“Cole, go with her. We’ll all follow.” I ordered, knowing he would be more level headed of the four of us, less likely to get kicked out of the hospital as they worked on her. Kyle and Matt could both be too hot headed to handle the situation alone.

“How is she Maxwell?” My chief asked as he approached.

“In rough shape. He drained her blood, something to do with time travel I think.” I was moving as I spoke. Nothing, not even my work, was stopping me being with Livy.

“Time travel?”

“I can update you later Chief, but I have to go right now.” I said as I reached the truck, Kyle and Matt right behind me and already climbing in.

“Go! Be with your family. I’ll catch up with you at the hospital once I handle things here.” I nodded, grateful he understood and jumped into the truck.

We found her and she was still alive. That had to mean something. We couldn’t lose her now. Fate couldn’t be that

cruel, even to us four reprobates, could it?

CHAPTER 18

COLE

Livy didn't regain consciousness once during the ride to the hospital. When we arrived Xander and two other doctors were waiting outside the ambulance doors and they rushed her off, Xander yelling to me that he had her before he disappeared.

A nurse had ushered me to a small waiting room and I was losing my mind pacing back and forth, just needing to be with her, to know she was going to make it!

She had looked so close to death, her skin too pale and all colour gone from her lips. If we were too late I would never

ever forgive myself, none of us would. We swore to protect her, to make sure no piece of shit ever got to lay hands on her ever again and we had failed terribly.

“Cole? Where is she?” I looked up as my parents came rushing into the waiting room. They both looked terrible, having not slept a wink since she was taken. They loved her like a daughter, and it had torn them apart, just as it had all of us, not knowing what she was suffering.

“Xander is with her, but it was bad.” My voice broke as I tried to explain.

“Kade said it was the serial killer, the one he’s been tracking, he took her?” My Dad asked. I knew Kade had called them as we raced to that farmhouse, so they knew some of the story.

“He was a fucking psycho!” I ranted, unable to hold it in. “He wanted to time travel and he thought the blood of his equal would m-make it happen. He almost fucking killed her, still might have.” Tears filled my eyes and I hurried to wipe them away. I never fucking cried, even as a broken little kid, I had never cried a fucking tear, but the thought of losing Livy was more than I could handle.

“She’s strong, son. If there’s any way.....” Dad engulfed me in a hug and I knew he too was fighting his emotions as he stopped to take a breath. “.....any way she can come back, then I know she will.”

I felt Mom join the hug and we all three just held each other, Mom’s rattling sobs making it harder for me to hold back my own tears. Livy had brought something to the lives of everyone in our family, something we would never get back if we lost her now.

Three hours later and we were still waiting. The whole family was crowded in the small room, even Simon, and we were all climbing the walls with fear she was still not stable.

Xander had been by in the first hour to say they were doing all they could to get blood back into her, but the blood loss wasn’t

the only problem. She was severely dehydrated to the point it had started to affect her kidneys. Her blood tests had come back a mess and the doctors were concerned her brain was swelling, because she had gone so long without water, and the blood loss on top. She had also been pumped full of a ton of unknown drugs which were not helping. He had warned us she was in a bad way, but assured us she was hanging on, and for hours that was the only hope we had, that she would hang on and find her way back to us.

“This is ridiculous!” Dad snapped as he jumped up and started pacing back and forth. He was in sweats and a t-shirt and his hair was a mess where he’d been running his hands through it over and over.

Mom had been curled into his side, trying hard not to cry, but every so often bursting into tears when it got to be too much.

Matt and I were sitting in the back corner, both just staring blankly at the wall in front of us and trying hard not to lose it, since Kyle was losing it enough for the whole family. He had already punched a wall and Kade had to stop him from flipping the small table in the corner. I knew it was killing him having to sit and wait knowing at any second Xand could walk in and tell us all that was it, she was gone,

When Kyle was emotional, he always channeled it into anger. Kade was trying hard to keep it together too, while keeping a very close watch on Kyle, grabbing him every time he stood to flip out, and calming him down with words of confidence in Livy’s strength.

Kade’s boss had been by and Kade and I gave him what we knew about the math I deciphered, and about what went down before and during the rescue. He tried to tell us about the guy who had taken Livy, since he had come up when they ran his prints, but none of us really listened. Nothing but knowing she would pull through, mattered.

“Xander will come to us as soon as he can Grant. You know that.” Mom said as she stood and tried to comfort her husband.

“When we get Olivia home she is never leaving our sight.” Dad went on, “One of us is always with her, She has been through.....through too much. We have to protect her.”

“We will Dad.” I agreed. When Livy got home I was never letting her leave the safety of it ever again.

The door to the waiting room opened and we all leapt up. Xander walked in and Simon went right to him, wrapping him in a hug filled with love and support.

“Tell me she’s still fighting Xand!” Kyle snapped, unable to let them have their minute together.

Xander looked up and nodded, and the whole room let out a small breath.

“She’s stable for now, but her kidneys are still struggling. We’ve hooked her up to a dialysis machine while they try to recover and she’s receiving fluids and antibiotics. Her tox screen showed heavy sedatives, so we need to try and flush the drugs out too.” Xander explained calmly.

“Is she awake? Has she spoken to you?” I asked hopefully.

“No. She hasn’t woken since she was brought in, and we’ve had to put her in a medically induced coma. There was brain swelling, and the coma gives it time to settle down.”

“A coma?” Mom sobbed.

“It’s for the best for now, Mom. We’ll keep her sedated until the swelling reduces, then, likely in a few days, we’ll be able to lessen the sedation and bring her around.”

“Is she going to come though this Xand?” Kade asked, the question we all needed to know.

“She’s still in critical condition, but she’s doing well for now. We’ve moved her to the ICU, where she’ll be watched closely. She’s in good hands and I’m staying closeby.”

“Can we see her?” Matt asked from beside me.

“Just two at a time and you need to keep visits short while she’s in the ICU. There’s a waiting room up there you can sit

in if you don't want to go home, but I'd suggest you all do. She won't be waking up for the next few days and you all look like shit."

"I'm not leaving until she does." Kyle grumbled and Kade, Matt and I agreed.

"We'll take it in turns guys. Xander's right, we all need to sleep, eat and shower, but we'll make sure there are always a few of us here for her." Dad said sternly, using the tone he'd used when he wanted to make sure we chose to do the right thing as kids, and just like when we were kids, we all agreed, unable to argue with him.

I took a deep breath, the first since she had been taken. She was fighting to come back to us, so I needed to stay strong for her and have faith she would find her way home.

OLIVIA

Kyle's voice was the first thing I heard when I woke from what felt like the longest sleep of my life.

"Don't you leave me Liv." He was whispering. "You make sure you come back because we all need you...I need you Princess. I felt like I'd never live again after I lost my team, but you....you made me want to live, you made me feel there was a reason I survived. Just don't leave me, ok? You're my future, the only future I can see."

I tried to speak, to tell him I wasn't going anywhere, but it was like my entire body was set in stone and I couldn't make any part of me move, not even my mouth. It was killing me to hear him sounding so broken and more than anything I wanted to comfort him, but instead the darkness pulled me back under, far away from him.

The next time the darkness released me, I heard Keira. She was close and her hand was running through my hair gently. I

tried hard to open my eyes, but again, nothing happened.

“They need you Honey.” She said gently. “I used to worry about what would happen to them when they grew up and left home, They have each other of course, and I knew they’d find a way to manage, because they are all very good men, strong and smart, but they needed someone else. They are good at comforting and looking out for each other, but they needed someone who could make them happy, who got what they had been through and loved them not in spite of it, but because of it. I know now, Olivia, I know that’s you. You can take care of my boys and give them the happiness they have needed for so long. You are the bright light they have spent their whole lives searching for, and I want you to know, Grant and I couldn’t be happier about you all being together. We know it’s not conventional, but not one of you has lived a conventional life. You’ve all been through hell and you deserve to be happy. You will always have our full support, all of you. So just wake up, ok Honey? The four of them fell apart when you started seizing last night. They thought that was it, they thought you were gone. They can’t lose you Olivia, we can’t. I love you sweet girl, and I need you back too. I need you to come and side with me and Evie in that crazy house full of boys.” She sighed as she went quiet, her hand continuously running through my hair. I longed to answer her, to tell her I loved her too, but my body would still not cooperate at all and I started to panic that something serious was wrong. What if I never got to speak, or move again? That happened, like locked in syndrome, or something like that? I tried to remember why I was there, thought hard about the last thing I remembered, and then it came to me, the crazy with the time machine and bags of my blood. Had he cost me everything? Was this my life now, laid trapped in my own body?

“Olivia?” Keira said more urgently. “Honey can you hear me?” I wondered what had made her think I could, then I felt her wipe my face and I realised in my panic, I was crying. “I’m here Honey, I’m with you. The guys are here too, in the waiting room. Don’t be scared. You’ll be ok, I know you will.”

That was all I heard before once again the darkness won our battle and pulled me away.

“Livy? Sweetheart, can you hear me?” It was Xander. His loud words roused me and I listened hard as I fought to open my eyes. I felt a hand take mine and the heat of it comforted me.

“Livy, it’s Xander. If you can hear me, can you squeeze my hand for me?” He asked. It took everything in me, but after a moment, I made my fingers put pressure on his hand.

“Good girl. You’re in the hospital sweetheart. You’re on some heavy sedatives, but we’re easing you off them. You’re going to start waking up more and more each time you come around.” He explained.

“Can she hear you? Did she react?” Grant asked, and his voice was rough and scratchy, but still comforting to hear.

“She squeezed my hand. She’s coming back Dad. Go, tell the guys. I’m going to have the sedatives brought down over the next few hours.” Xander sounded so excited and I realised that, mixed with what I had heard Keira and Kyle saying, meant I had been in really bad shape. They all thought I was going to die. They were shocked and relieved I had woken up.

I clutched Xander’s hand tight, trying to take some assurance from him that I wasn’t going to die now I was waking up.

“Livy, it’s ok sweetheart. You’ve given us all a scare, but you’re going to be ok. It will take time, but you’ll be just fine. Me, Mom and Dad, and the guys are all here with you. You’re safe. Just rest. Hopefully next time you come round, you’ll be able to open your eyes for us.”

I tried to fight the darkness again, even harder this time. I wanted to stay with Xander and Grant. I wanted to feel safe, but it was pulling me under and it was strong.

“Xander’s right sweetheart. Just rest. We’ve all got you.” Grant said and I just felt his hand in my free one as darkness won once again.

This time when I got free of the darkness, things sounded so much louder. No one was talking, but I could hear machines beeping around me and people walking around close by. I tried to open my eyes and to my surprise, my eyelids moved a little. It hurt, but I forced them to open all of the way and instantly calmed when I found Kade and Kyle sitting in chairs beside the stark white bed I lay in. They were both asleep, arms folded across their chests and heads bowed forward as they sat side by side. Kade was snoring and they both looked so uncomfortable.

The room I was in was small, with four white walls, now cloaked in shadow. I looked to the window to my right and found that it was dark out, then smiled again when I looked lower and found Cole asleep on a small sofa at the side of the room. Only half of him fit on, his legs hanging over the arm and his head awkwardly propped on the other. He had stubble on his face, which I had never really seen on him. He was usually clean shaven, but I knew, seeing the three of them, they had been through a tough time. They all wore crumpled clothes and not one of them had styled their hair with products like they usually did.

Needing to find Matt, to know he was alright, I scanned the remainder of the room and found him in a chair in the corner to my left. He leant back with his head against the wall and his mouth slightly open. He too had a heavy covering of stubble and he looked exhausted, dark rings under his eyes. I longed to go to one of them and curl up in their lap, but just moving my head had been difficult, so I knew moving out of the bed wasn't going to happen.

Instead I just sat back, looking between the four of them, just so grateful to be there with them. I knew I had come close to losing them all, to leaving them, and because of that I knew I would never take for granted a single moment I got with each of them, ever again. Every moment was precious, I knew that better than most after so very many of mine had been wasted in The Darkness.

Kyle was the first to stir. His head moved a little, then shot up in panic and he locked those stunning eyes right on mine.

“Hey.” I whispered, my voice unable to do more.

“Liv? You’re awake! Thank fuck!” He gasped as he moved forward in his seat and took my hand firmly in his. “I was so scared we lost you.” His eyes were filled with tears and he looked like he had been through hell, his face tired, with dark circles around his eyes and his usually perfectly trimmed stubble, much too long.

“I am never leaving you.” I promised, remembering how scared he had sounded when I woke up and heard him before. “I love you.”

“I love you too Princess, so fucking much.” Finally he smiled and I was able to relax a little when I realised he would be ok. I’d take care of him, of all of them, and they would be alright. They were my guys and I would never let them go without a serious fucking fight.

“You all look so tired. You should be at home in your beds.”

“We weren’t leaving you, We almost lost you Liv.”

“Takes more than a time travelling crazy to get rid of me.” I joked and he laughed a little, startling the others to all jump awake, almost in sync.

I turned to Kade as he sat up and smiled when he stared at me like he didn’t quite believe I was looking back.

“Fuck Love, it’s good to see you smiling back at me.” He whispered as he stood and placed a large hand on my knee over the blankets.

“You’re awake?” Matt appeared at the foot of the bed and just stared at me. Cole ran up behind him and froze at Matt’s side.

“Don’t you ever do that to us again Brains!” He tried to make it sound like a scold, but the tears running down his face gave him away.

“I missed you guys.” I whispered, feeling tearful myself.

“Not as much as we missed you *Carina*,”

“Is everyone ok? What happened to the time lord?” I was trying to lighten the mood, but only Cole smiled and I knew it was too soon for them.

“Everyone is fine and the fucker who took you is dead. It’s a long story, but we got to you before he managed to take all of your blood. Xander needs to talk to you about your health, but it was touch and go for days Livy. We really thought we wouldn’t get you back from this.” Kade explained.

“I thought of you guys, and of our family, and it made me fight to come back, I know it did. I have a life now, a good one, and people I love. I wasn’t letting that go”

“We’re so fucking grateful you fought Love.” Kade squeezed my knee as he spoke and I knew he was emotional. They all were.

“We should call Mom and Dad and get Xander in here to check you over.” Matt suggested as he looked down to his cell phone in his hand, but I stopped him.

“In a minute, but first, while it’s just us.....would you.....will you all just hold me for a minute? It’s all I wanted when I thought I was dying.” I admitted tearfully.

Within seconds Cole had me wrapped in his arms from one side, and Kyle from the other. Matt leant over and wrapped his arms around the three of us from the front and Kade came over top, engulfing all of us and his hand landing on my shoulder. I was cocooned between them all, surrounded by their strength and love. It was the greatest feeling in the world and it was mine, whenever I needed it.

“We’re never letting you go, Liv. We’re all going to be even more of a pain in your ass now because you are literally never leaving our sight.” Kyle said as he held me, and I knew, for a while at least, I’d be good with that. There was nowhere else I wanted to be, but at their side.

There was hope of a future with them, hope of happiness and light in my dark life. I had no idea if they could help me repair

all of my shattered pieces, probably not, but I could live with being a little broken, as long as I had the four of them with me. Who knew, maybe together, we could start to put all of our tiny pieces together to make our own version of whole and happy. Only time would tell, but one thing was for sure, whatever came next, in this twisted life we seemed to have been given, we would get through it together, because together we were stronger and there was nothing that could ever tear us apart.

Shadows of Shattered Souls - Book 2 in the **Pieces of Us series**, coming very soon!

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Thank you for taking the time to read this book. It was a joy to write for me and I really hope you enjoyed reading it.

If you have the time I would really appreciate any review you could leave for me, even if it's just a few words. It really helps me understand which parts of my work you enjoy and which I can work on to make my writing even better for you.

Many Thanks

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